

Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners Association

July 2020

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Herb Gardening for a More Flavorful Future

Finally, our flower and vegetable gardens are hitting their summer stride. Truly a season of flavorful eating; think fresh basil sprinkled over sliced tomatoes; chopped cilantro topping your taco; fresh dill perking up your sautéed zucchini; fragrant fresh oregano on your pizza.

In the not too distant past, when drug stores and doctors offices were few and far between, most household gardens had a special section for herbs. These plants served as the basis for cosmetics and simple remedies, as well as seasoning and preservatives for foods.

When you think of herb garden, what image springs to mind? Neatly clipped hedges arranged in formal patterns, such as those in Colonial Williamsburg? These intricate designs with their intriguing mixtures of textures and colors are indeed beautiful. However, not very practical for everyday cooking purposes. In practical terms, a herb garden should be located as close as possible to the kitchen door. A small raised bed will give you enough space for half a dozen different herbs.



A major consideration is that most herbs demand full sun, so if your kitchen door is on the shady side of the house, that will not work so well. But, a herb garden can be a pot or two on the front porch or in a sunny kitchen window or even a hanging basket.

A small planting in a large pot, for example, might be the summer essentials – basil, cilantro and dill. These are all annuals and easily grown from seed. The winter essentials, all perennials, rosemary, thyme and sage might be tucked into a sheltered corner near the kitchen door. Or plant them by the front door if that is where you get sunshine. In either location, they will delight your nose as you leave or enter the house. Picture a hanging basket with a clump of chives in the center surrounded by creeping thyme and nasturtiums. Plant creeping thyme along a walkway so you can enjoy the fragrance as you brush past it.

For growing inside in a sunny window, choose herbs that have a mature height of no more than 12 inches. Many of the larger herbs have dwarf varieties which will do well in a six inch pot. Some smaller growing herbs are spicy globe basil, dwarf sage, winter savory, both varieties of parsley, onion and garlic chives, and some varieties of oregano and thyme. Check the mature size description carefully when buying plants or reading

nursery catalogs. As with the herbs in your garden, frequent pruning or pinching (otherwise known as harvesting the leaves) will keep your indoor plants neat and at a manageable size for their space.

As with all gardening, success begins with the quality of your soil. Fortunately, most herbs do not require the rich growing conditions demanded by the stars of the vegetable and flower gardens. For the most part, your herb garden does not require regular fertilizing, as the best flavors are developed when they are grown on the lean side. Many will do well in the dry conditions we frequently experience in late summer and early fall. While light, well drained soil in a sunny spot will suit most herbs, a few, such as the mint family, will thrive in part shade and in damp conditions.

If you don't have a spot dedicated especially to herbs, plant them randomly throughout your flower and vegetable beds. They help out by attracting pollinating insects, repelling destructive pests and some have a beneficial effect of improving the flavor and quality of vegetables near them. For example, Parsley planted with tomatoes seems to improve the growth of both. Basil is also compatible with tomatoes and it is very convenient to have them together when you harvest the tomatoes. Basil and sweet peppers are another pair that help each other grow better.

There are herbs to suit every gardener's individual taste, and here in Central Virginia we are blessed with a long growing season in which to enjoy them. In addition to growing your family's favorites, the herb garden is a good place to introduce new taste sensations. In the herb garden, or tucked into the flower garden, you might include some edible flowers, such as violets, chives, nasturtiums and borage. Pretty pink chive blossoms of onion flavor and the orange or red nasturtium blooms have a peppery kick. The beautiful blue, or sometimes pink, blooms of the borage add a hint of cucumber flavor to a salad or sandwich filling.



Also attractive in the flower garden are marjoram. The perennial monarda, or bee balm, cut flower and the flowers are much loved by bees and hummingbirds. It is also native to our area. The leaves were used by the early colonists who were boycotting British tea. The annual love-in-a-mist, adds charm to any setting with its finely cut, fern-like foliage and beautiful sky blue, star shaped flowers. This is grown for its seeds, inside an interesting, papery balloon-like pod. About the size of a poppy seed, they are dried and used in baked goods where they impart a peppery, nutmeg flavor. The pink flowers of wild marjoram and the white flowers of sweet marjoram are attractive to bees and butterflies and these members of the oregano family are at home in flower and vegetable beds as well as herb gardens.

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The mint family contains some of the most widely known and used of all flavoring plants. They are perennials, grow easily, spread rapidly and can take over an area if not contained. This is one of the few herbs that does well in damp, partly shaded locations. While it is not usually welcome in lawns, it is pleasant to mow over a patch of mint at the edge of the woods. The most



Not quite as rampant as its relatives, Chocolate Mint adds a refreshing touch to cookies, cakes tea and hot cocoa.

popular mints are Spearmint and Peppermint. Lemon Balm is a mint like, fast spreading perennial. Not a member of the mint family, it prefers the same growing conditions as most of the other culinary herbs, full sun and well drained soil. Its lemon-scented leaves are much used in tea and in perfumes.



A workhorse herb in any garden is parsley. The hardy biennial comes in two varieties; curly or French parsley and flat leaf or Italian. They are usually grown as annuals because their first-year leaves are more tender and flavorful than the second year leaves when the plant is preparing to flower and set seed. Parsley is easy to grow from seeds, but the seeds are extremely slow to germinate. It may take four to six weeks for parsley seeds to sprout. Soaking the seeds in warm water for 24 hours before planting will help to speed up germination. Both varieties are useful in cooking and the curly variety makes an attractive garnish and a pretty addition to small flower arrangements.



Basil is also a plant at home in formal and informal herb gardens as well as the flower and vegetable garden. It comes in a wide range of sizes, from a dwarf that looks like miniature boxwood to two foot tall plants with ruffled purple leaves. Basil flavors range from the well known sweet basil used in pesto, to spicy anise-clove flavor of Thai sweet basil to citrusy lime or lemon, or cinnamon. The Holy Basil is said to have an aroma that is spicy with hints of chocolate and coffee. Basil loves our summer heat, but will need to be watered more frequently when it is extremely hot.



Some of the less common herbs you might want to try are the Mexican Mint

Marigold, which is used as a substitute for French

Tarragon which is rather difficult to grow in our area.

Lovage looks a bit like celery and tastes like celery and is used in salads and in potato and chicken dishes.



Mexican Mint Marigold or Sweet



Lavender is usually grown in the flower garden, but its flowers and leaves have culinary uses as well. Chamomile can be either an annual or a perennial, and its small, sweet smelling flowers are used in teas and cosmetic washes.

Do sprinkle a variety of these versatile, valuable plants in your gardens. Just remember that most need six to eight hours of sun each day, not-too-rich soil, good drainage and frequent harvesting of leaves and flowers. If you would like more information about herb gardening, visit the Virginia Cooperative Extension web site: <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/> and look for **Publication 426-420, Herb Culture and Use**. This helpful booklet will get you on your way to a more flavorful future in the garden. *All photos used by permission of W. ATLEE BURPEE COMPANY.*

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Master Gardener Jackie Fairbarns developed a taste for gardening as a child, “helping” her mother grow WWII Victory Gardens in North Carolina. The retired association executive now lives and gardens in Buckingham County.



