

# Growing HERBS

Growing your own herbs is a great way to start a productive garden, according to our gardening expert, *Gillian Carson*

**S**ome people find themselves disappointed with the quality and taste of supermarket-bought herbs. If this is you, then perhaps you have considered growing your own? You don't have to grow many and by buying plants from your local garden centre, you can start harvesting them right away.

Herbs add zest and colour to most dishes and are the lifeblood of any kitchen garden. They are also decorative and can be used to soften pathways and add unexpected colour in the form of flowers, variegated leaves and seed pods.

Herbs, with their pungent smell and strong flavours, are designed to repel pests and are very low-maintenance. You can use them in a variety of ways, from fresh-picked to dried, frozen and in seed form. And, these versatile plants can be grown indoors or outdoors, which makes growing them an attractive idea for those without a garden.

The variety is endless, from creeping thymes to feathery dill and structural bay trees, to pots overflowing with sweet marjoram, mint and basil. Even if you don't use them in the kitchen, who wouldn't want a rich, colourful display outside their back door?

## HOW TO GROW

Herbs are one of the easiest types of plants to grow in the kitchen garden. They require very little maintenance and once established, will give you useful crops, in some cases, for years to come.

However, before you start, it's good to know which plant group your herbs belong to. Are they annuals or perennials, woody or herbaceous?



Once you have determined this, you'll have a better idea of how to grow them.

Annuals are normally grown from seed, as they complete their life-cycle in one year. Some, like coriander, dill and parsley, can be sown direct into the soil from Spring to Summer. Other herbs, like basil and sweet marjoram, will need to be sown under cover and protected from low temperatures or cold winds.

It's easiest to buy woody perennials like rosemary, sage and thyme from a local plant grower. Herbaceous perennials like mint and horseradish can be propagated by root cuttings. In fact, they romp away so quickly that you may need to contain them in a specific area or pot. Similarly, fennel and dill will self-seed prolifically.

## WHICH HERBS TO GROW?

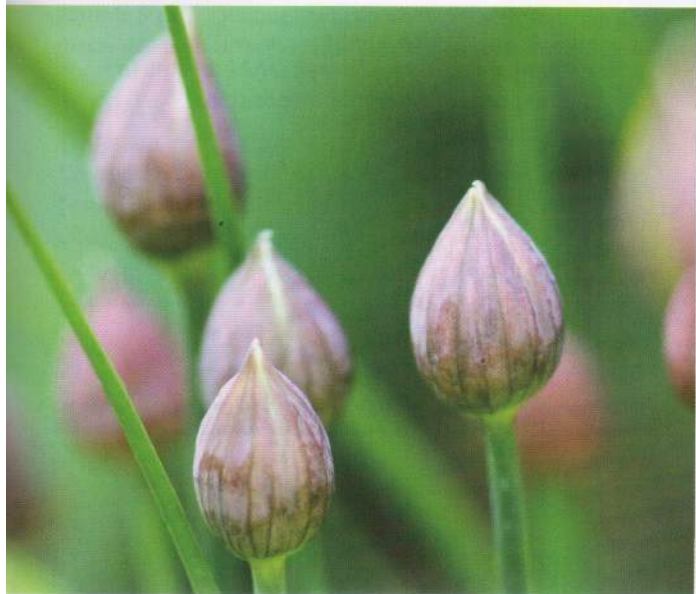
### WOODY PERENNIALS

#### Sage

Technically a shrub, sage's leaves are aromatic, with a strong flavour. Sage comes in many colours: purple, yellow and variegated types. Leaves are picked fresh, or dried for later use. Prune after flowering to promote re-growth but also replace the bush every three to four years.

#### Rosemary

Rosemary is decorative and pungent. Some use it as a decorative hedge to border the herb garden. Pinch out the growing shoots to maintain a bushy plant. Great with cooked meats. >



## GROWING HERBS



(LEFT) Marjoram  
(ABOVE RIGHT) Thyme  
(FAR RIGHT) Mint  
(BELOW RIGHT) A herb garden

### Thyme

Available in a range of colours from dark green to yellow and bushy types to trailing or creeping types. Great for softening the edges of pathways and paving, it prefers a well-drained sunny site and needs to be trimmed regularly and divided every few years.

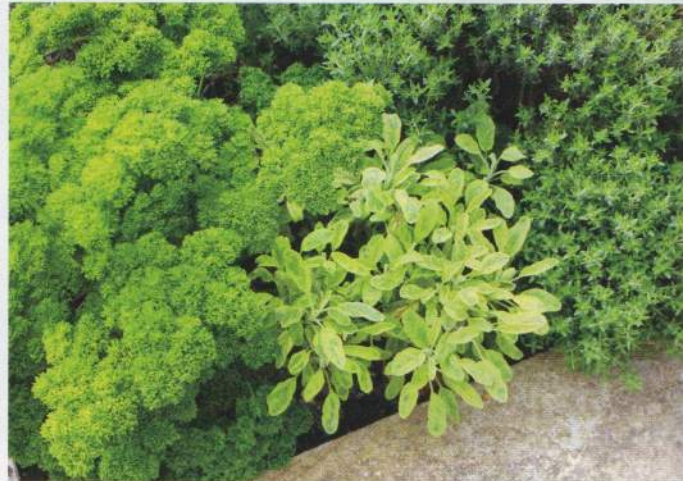
### Bay

Bay is one of the basic ingredients of a bouquet garni and is useful in the kitchen. Although bay is hardy, it's unreliably so and can be susceptible to cold winds. Plant in a sheltered spot or in a pot that can be moved in winter.

## HERBACEOUS PERENNIALS

### Mint

Mint gives your garden a lovely, fresh, green look and bursts with aromas when brushed past or watered. And... you can add it to your jug of Pimms for that 'professional' look! Mint can take over your garden, but confined to a pot or stone trough, it can look amazing.



Purple Sage

Thyme

*Quick Tip*

Remember dried herbs make great potpourris.



Coriander



## MEDICINAL USES

### Borage

Is reputed to 'make merry the hearts of men' and was traditionally used as a garnish when making the drink Claret Cup. Although it's possible that the alcohol was responsible for the merriment, there are many ways in which herbs can prove useful outside the kitchen.

### Peppermint Tea

Fabulous for upset tummies and bowels.

### Lemon Balm

Make a tea to ease headaches and menstrual cramps.

### Comfrey Cream

Cooling and soothing for bruised skin and swelling.

### Chamomile

Infuse Chamomile flowers to make an herbal tea to ease shock and nervous dispositions.

### Lavender Oil

You may not be able to extract your own Lavender oil but it is particularly antiseptic and soothing for burns. You can use the oil directly on your skin. Putting a few drops on your pillow at night can help you sleep better.





### Marjoram

The confusing thing about marjoram is that some people call it oregano. In fact, there are two types of marjoram – sweet marjoram has a more delicate flavour and is normally used fresh, while pot marjoram (or oregano) is usually used dried.

### Chives

There are several varieties of chives, ranging from small grass-like plants to those producing thicker, flatter leaves. Both, however, have a very strong, onion flavour and produce beautiful, purple pom-pom like flowers in Spring. Propagate by digging up in Autumn, dividing the plants and replanting.

### Horseradish

Pungent and hot, the roots of the horseradish plant are not to everyone's taste. It is, however, essential if you're a fan of roast beef! Although horseradish is a perennial, left to grow by itself, it will quickly take over your herb bed. To keep it under control, lift the roots in Autumn and store in moist sand until Spring, when you can plant it again.

### Tarragon

A fantastic accompaniment to fish dishes and sauces, tarragon is a great addition to your herb garden. It can be easily killed off by a harsh winter, though, so give it some protection over the colder months.

### Sorrel

Great with soft cheeses, sorrel has a fresh and tart flavour. Use the young leaves and grow in moist soil in full sun. Be careful where you plant it as it can be invasive. Lift the plants in Autumn, divide and replant to keep them under control. Can also be grown as an annual.

### Parsley

Parsley comes in two types, flat leaf and tightly-curved leaf. Both have the same flavour and are great chopped in sauces or used as a garnish. Strictly speaking, parsley is a biennial herb, which simply means that the plant will usually last two years before it self-seeds.

## ANNUALS

### Coriander

Coriander is a very useful plant in the herb garden as its leaves can be used to perk up salads and curry dishes and its seeds can be used in the kitchen, too. It's best sown from seed in a slightly shaded spot, if growing for the leaves, or a hot sunny spot if you're growing for the seeds.

### Basil

Basil comes in a variety of shapes and colours. The green, floppy-leaved type that you see in the shops, a purple variety with

## HOW TO MAKE MINT TEA

In high Summer, when you have an abundance of mint, why not make a refreshing cup of mint tea? It's so easy and much prettier than a cup of shop-bought tea.

### Ingredients

- \* 2 long sprigs of mint (the more you add, the mintier it will be)
- \* 2 cups of water
- \* honey
- \* slice of lemon
- \* your favourite teacup and saucer (optional)

Put the mint leaves (or the whole sprig) in the water and bring to the boil. The water will turn yellowy green. Then strain into a teacup. Add some honey and a slice of lemon. Drink it while sitting in your garden – you deserve it!

spiky leaves and a Greek type which has small pointy leaves – all of which can be grown outside in the summer months.

### Dill

Statuesque and feathery, dill is an extremely decorative plant and will add delicate structure to your herb garden. In a similar way to coriander, dill is grown for its leaves and seeds and adds interest to fish dishes and is also used in pickled gherkin recipes.

## HOW TO SAVE AND STORE HERBS

There are a number of ways in which you can store herbs, or prolong their shelf-life. In the case of green leafy herbs such as parsley, basil and coriander, you can pick a bunch of them and put them in a glass of water like a bunch of flowers. They will stay fresh for a few days.

Herbs such as thyme, rosemary and sage should be cut as small sprigs, placed in a small plastic bag and stored in the crisper draw in your fridge.

If you want to store your herbs for longer, you could try freezing them. Leafy herbs can be chopped, mixed with olive oil and frozen in cubes. You can freeze woodier herbs, like rosemary and thyme, on the stem. Simply wash, place in a plastic bag and freeze.

Drying herbs takes a little more effort. Tie in small bunches and blanch in boiling water for a few seconds. Pat dry and then hang them in a warm place such as in the airing cupboard or over an Aga. Drying time can vary depending on the heat applied, but the herbs are ready when the stems crack rather than bend and the leaves are brittle. ●

## Blogs

Gillian blogs at [www.mytinyplot.com](http://www.mytinyplot.com) and also teaches at the Bath Garden School.

## LINKS

**Jekka's Herb Farm**  
[www.jekkasherbfarm.com](http://www.jekkasherbfarm.com)

**The Herb Society**  
[www.herbsociety.org.uk](http://www.herbsociety.org.uk)

**Instant Herb Garden**  
[www.rocketgardens.co.uk](http://www.rocketgardens.co.uk)

