

GROWING HERBS OUTDOORS

LOCATION

Any well-drained sunny site will be good. Poor soils tend to produce highly aromatic foliage, while richer soils produce less aromatic, but more abundant foliage. All soils will benefit from the addition of organic matter such as compost, manure or peat moss, dug in to a depth of 20cm (8"). The site should be raked to produce a smooth surface, removing all weeds and debris. Although most herbs grow best in full sun, partially shaded sites will nonetheless produce a bountiful harvest. Even in shaded woody areas, you can establish a garden of shade-tolerant herbs such as chervil, sweet cicely, mint and woodruff.

PLANTING

The usual planting time is in the spring after the danger of frost is past especially for annual herbs like basil, dill and summer savory. Many popular herbs are hardy perennials and can be planted any time during the growing season, even in the fall. Develop a layout for your herb garden, keeping in mind the spreading habits of some herbs and the vertical growth of others. Set out herbs in the garden where they are to be planted according to your plan and begin. Starting with the first plant, make a hole in the garden soil large enough to accommodate its rootball. Remove its pot, set the plant in the hole and firm the soil around it. Water thoroughly and stick the identification label at the base of the plant.

WATER

Water with a sprinkler or by hand, less frequently but more thoroughly so that the water penetrates. Water should penetrate 20-25cm (8-12") deep to reach roots.

MOVING HERBS INDOORS

There is no need to forego fresh herbs once winter sets in. Many herbs can be brought indoors, and with proper care, survive the winter months. The tender perennial herbs like rosemary, bay laurel, and scented geranium, must be wintered indoors, but you'll probably want to pot up others. Proper care means providing ample light, even moisture and moderate temperatures.

It is important to begin potting up herbs from the garden early (August). Do not wait until frost is imminent because herbs must be gradually acclimatized to the indoor environment, especially to the lower light conditions. Use a good draining potting mixture and do not try to squeeze the root ball in too small a pot. Prune back foliage and roots if necessary. Often many of the leaves wilt and die, but new growth will soon take their place. Remove dying leaves as they turn yellow. It is a good practice to dip your plants in an insecticidal soap solution before moving indoors to guard against aphids and spider mites. Over a period of several weeks place plants in progressively shadier locations, and then move indoors to your sunniest window.

WINTER PROTECTION

Perennial herbs left to winter outdoors will stand a better chance of survival if a mulch of straw or dead leaves (10cm/4") is applied just before the ground freezes in late fall. This is more important in areas where the snow cover is not persistent through the winter.

HARVESTING, DRYING and STORAGE

Fresh herbs taste better than dried, so whenever possible use herbs fresh. Freezing is a good way to preserve the fresh flavour for winter use. Just wash, shake dry and freeze herbs in freezer bags. No need to blanch, and no need to defrost before use, since it is easier to chop them while still frozen.

The most common method of preserving herbs is drying. Drying concentrates and preserves the flavouring oils contained in the leaves and seeds. Since these oils reach a peak at certain stages in the plant's development, proper timing of harvest will ensure a good quality product. Leaves are best gathered just before or during flowering. Seeds are best when they ripen to a dark colour. Roots, though not containing oils, are best dug after the first fall frosts. By this time the plant has transported much of its food from the leaves to the roots.

When gathering leaves and seeds, the best time of day is the early morning after the dew has evaporated. Always leave some leaves at the base of each stem for new growth. Sometimes you can get 2-3 crops of leaves in a season. Make sure leaves are clean of dust and soil. Strip large-leaved herbs from the stems to promote faster and more thorough drying.

Spread herbs (leaves, seeds, chopped roots) over a screen or netting in a dark, ventilated area. When completely dry, store in dark, airtight containers in a cool location. If drying is not thorough, herbs can lose colour and taste and become moldy. Just to be sure, finish off herbs in an oven at its lowest temperature setting for 10-20 minutes. Don't grind leaves until just before use, because flavour dissipates less readily from whole leaves. Hanging small bunches of herbs from the ceiling of a warm dry place is the most picturesque method of drying. These relatively simple steps will allow you to enjoy your own home-grown herbs all winter long.

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