

# HOME HORTICULTURE

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*Information Packet was Compiled from the Michigan State University Home Horticulture Database.*

## Growing Herbs

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Home growing of herbs is gaining in popularity as more and more herbs are being enjoyed dried in fragrant sachets and potpourris. Herbs are very easy plants to grow and can even be grown indoors. They require little care and space have few insect and disease problems and require only moderate fertility levels. Thus, growing herbs has become a continuing and satisfying hobby for many home gardeners.

When beginning an herb garden, it is important to choose a proper site. An optimal site is one where the herb garden receives at least 4 to 6 hours of sunlight a day. Herbs will grow well under a wide range of soil conditions, with the exception of extremely wet, poorly drained soil. Popular herbs such as sage, rosemary and thyme require a well-drained but moderately moist soil. Poorly drained soil can be improved by modifying or amending the soil or by use of raised beds. Although they have little fertility requirements, herbs do better in soils of low to medium fertility.

The garden site should be prepared in the same manner as a vegetable garden: spaded to a depth of 6 to 12 inches, leveled and raked to remove any large clods and debris. The size of the garden depends largely upon the quantity of herbs desired. A good size for an average kitchen herb garden is 4 by 20 feet.

More common herbs, such as dill, basil and parsley are usually available from local seed dealers, and those that are less common may be purchased from companies specializing in herbs. Annuals usually grown from seed tend to grow, flower and produce seed during one season and then die. Biennial herbs grow for two seasons, flowering the second year only, and perennial herbs overwinter and flower each season.

Summer care includes weed control and provision for adequate moisture. Mulch is an attractive and effective means of controlling weeds and maintaining constant soil moisture and temperature for the root systems. Mulches include bark chips or shredded bark, compost, ground corncobs, pecan hulls or dried grass clippings and should be applied at least 3-inches deep around the plants.

Some recommended varieties for use in planting include:

### *Balm, Lemon*

Uses: Herb and iced teas, leaves gloss and scent on wood furniture.

Description: Heart shaped, light, bright green leaves, yellow or white flowers with strong lemon scent.

Culture: Started from cuttings or seed in spring or early fall, harvest just before flowering stage, leave 2 to 3-inches of stem above ground.

### *Basil, Sweet*

Uses: Small culinary uses for both leaves and seeds.

Description: Blue green, feathery foliage, grows 2 to 4-feet tall with tiny yellow blossoms.

Culture: Started from seed, April through July. Sow in a well-drained, sunny place and thin the seedlings to 8 to 10-inch spacings.

### *Lavender*

Uses: Lovely subtle fragrance, used in sachets and perfumes.

Description: Somewhat woody perennial, grows from 1 1/2 to 3-feet tall with bluish lavender flowers.

Culture: Propagate by means of cuttings or layered divisions of three year old plants, dry, well-drained sunny location in alkaline soil and harvest as bloom opens.

### *Mint: Peppermint and Spearmint*

Uses: Many culinary uses and as ingredients in potpourris and sachets.

Description: Upright growing, reach 2-feet in height. Peppermint has dark green leaves, reddish stem and lavender flowers. Spearmint is lighter green with pink flowers. Both emit a warm, spicy scent.

Culture: Easily propagated by division of clumps, space at 2-foot intervals, harvest entire plant by cutting the shoots to 1-inch above ground just before flowering.

### *Oregano*

Uses: Major ingredient in Italian and Mexican main courses.

Description: Sprawling stems, may reach 2-feet in height with 2 to 4-inch clusters of small, purple-pink flowers.

Culture: Grows well in poor soil and can be propagated by seed or division, flavor is best just after the flower buds form.

### *Parsley*

Uses: Culinary and as a garnish.

Description: Two types-curled and Italian. Curled has tightly curled foliage while Italian has broad, flat leaves and stronger flavor.

Culture: Plant seeds in early spring in medium-rich soil. Can be harvested as soon as the plants are 6-inches tall. Leaves may be stored fresh in a jar in the refrigerator or dried for later use.

### *Rosemary*

Uses: A cooking herb used dried or fresh.

Description: Evergreen shrub that reaches a height of 2 to 4-feet. Needle-like, leathery, dark green leaves with a gray undersurface. Flowers are pale lavender-blue and the whole plant has a "balsamic smell".

Culture: Propagation by means of cuttings 4 to 6-inches long, well-drained soil containing lime. Soil must be kept moist.

### *Sage*

Uses: Culinary-aromatic and slightly bitter.

Description: Shrubby with oblong, woolly, wrinkled gray green leaves; grow to a height of 2 feet and sprawl unless kept trimmed. Lilac blue flowers.

Culture: Can be started from seeds, cuttings or from crown divisions and planted in sunny location when they are 3 to 4-inches tall. Harvest before plants bloom or cut the stems up to 8-inches long and hang to dry.

### *Tarragon, French*

Uses: One of truly "fine" herbs adds special flavor to food.

Description: Grows 2 to 3-feet tall, with dark green, narrow, elongated leaves.

Culture: Plants best started from clump divisions in early spring and grown in sunny, fertile, well-drained site. Harvest fresh in early July and again in August for drying.

### *Thyme*

Uses: Culinary, oil used in medicines and perfumes.

Description: Low-growing, wiry stemmed, grows 4 to 8-inches tall. Stems stiff and woody while leaves are small, oval and gray-green and flowers are purple clusters.

Culture: Light, well-drained soil, started from seed, cuttings or division. New plants should be started every 3 or 4 years, sometimes two or more crops can be harvested in the same season.

Some other herbs worth consideration when planting are: Borage, Caraway, Chamomile, Chervil, Coriander, Fennel, French Sorrel, Salad Burnet, Summer Savory, and Sweet Marjoram.

SOURCE: "Selected Herbs for Illinois Gardens"  
by James C. Schmidt and Dianne A. Noland  
Department of Horticulture  
Cooperative Extension Service,  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
College of Agriculture

## Using and Storing Herbs and Spices

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When using herbs and spices as a seasoning for foods, it is important to use these sparingly. Herbs and spices should be used to enhance foods' natural flavors, rather than to dominate them. There are some exceptions - heavily spiced, exotic dishes often require a good deal of spices in their preparation.

To substitute dried herbs for fresh herbs in cooking: use 1/3 teaspoon powdered or 1/2 teaspoon crushed for every tablespoon fresh, chopped herbs required. When using fresh herbs in cooking, it helps to place whole herbs or spices in cheesecloth bags for easy removal. Do not overboil spices or herbs, as some may become bitter. The nutritional contribution of herbs is negligible; however spices and herbs can be used to flavor foods without added calories.

There are many processes, which are used for the drying and storing of herbs. Air Drying requires the stems be tied together and hung upside down in a dark, well-ventilated place to dry.

Microwave Oven Drying begins with placing clean herbs in a single layer between two paper towels and heating for 1 to 3 minutes on high, mixing after every 30 seconds. Then cool and test for brittleness, repeating if necessary. To prevent damage to the oven, place a small container of water in the oven during drying. When drying with a conventional oven, begin by placing the clean herbs on shallow trays in oven, leaving oven door ajar and turning the heat to the lowest setting, about 150 degrees Fahrenheit. Allow the herbs to dry, testing after each hour. A small electric fan placed to circulate air into the oven cavity will speed the drying time.

Herbs can either be stored or frozen. When storing, place the herbs in airtight jars, out of direct sunlight. To freeze the herbs, wash fresh herbs carefully and pat dry. Then place the herbs in airtight freezer bags or containers and freeze. Blanching is not necessary.

Ground spices tend to lose their flavor over time and should be replaced at least once a year. Date jars or cans when purchased for easy replacement, and store spices in dark, non-absorbent containers in a dry, cool area.

### SOURCE:

"Using and Storing Herbs and Spices"  
Cooperative Extension Service-Bulletin E-1898  
Michigan State University, August 1985

## Harvesting and Drying Herbs

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Harvest time for an herb is best determined by the growing condition of the herb, rather than by a specific date or month. Most herbs are ready to be harvested just as the flower buds first appear. The leaves contain the maximum amount of volatile oils at this stage of growth, giving the greatest flavor and fragrance to the finished product.

To extend the use of herbs into the winter months, plan to harvest and dry various herbs during the summer and fall. Herbs should be harvested at the proper time of the day; early in the morning, just before the sun is hot. Their fragrance makes this early task quite enjoyable.

Annual herbs can be cut back quite severely during harvest. Using a sharp knife or pruning shears, cut just above a leaf or a pair of leaves, leaving 4 to 6-inches of the stem for later growth. However, if an annual herb is grown for its seed, it should not be cut back and used for the leaves. In these cases, allow the plants to mature fully and then harvest them. Collect the seed heads when they are turning brown by cutting them from the plants and drying them on a tray made of very fine wire mesh.

Leafy perennial herbs should not be cut back as heavily as annuals. Only about one-third of the top growth should be removed at a time, and in some cases only the leafy tips should be removed. Careful pruning insures that new growth will be produced and a compact habit of growth maintained. Most perennial herbs will be ready to harvest just prior to or during the early part of July, with a second harvest possible in September in the cases of herbs such as tarragon and oregano. A sharp knife or pair of pruning shears are necessary tools when harvesting herbs. The herbs should be fresh and clean before drying and storing, regardless of the method used to cure them. To clean, wash stems in cold running water and drain on paper toweling. The easiest way to dry herbs is to allow the leaves or entire stems to air-dry at room temperature.

When drying whole branches or stems: first wash and dry, then gather 5 to 8 stems together and tie them into a bundle. Place the bundle into a brown paper bag with stems extending out the open end and hang in a dark warm place (70 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit). Depending on temperature and moisture, drying time will take 2 to 4 weeks. Tray drying is usually used for short-stemmed herbs or for individual leaves; an old window screen or smaller drying tray fashioned from 2-inch x 2-inch lumber and screening usually works as a drying tray. The trays should be kept in a warm, dark place until the herbs are dry.

An ordinary gas, electric or microwave oven can be used for quicker drying of herbs. Care must be taken, for herbs cannot be desiccated too quickly at too high a temperature or much of the flavor, oils and color of the herbs would be lost. When drying with a conventional oven: place the leaves or stems on a cookie sheet or shallow pan and warm at no more than 180 degrees Fahrenheit for 3 to 4 hours with the oven door open. When using a microwave oven: place the clean stems or leaves on a paper plate or towel and set the control on high for 1 to 3 minutes; turn the stems over or mix the leaves every 30 seconds.

Store the herbs in airtight jars in a cool, dry place. If the entire stems were dried, remove the leaves and crush or crumble them in jars. The herbs must be completely dried or they will form mold. Keep the jars away from light and heat, as both will destroy the quality of the herbs.

There are many other methods of preserving herbs. Many herbs can be successfully frozen and retain their freshness after being thawed. When freezing herbs, they must first be harvested and washed thoroughly. Blanch the herbs in boiling water for a minute or two, and then cool quickly in ice water. After draining, place the herbs in a package and freeze them. Some herbs, such as parsley, chives and basil can be pureed with a small amount of water in a blender, and then frozen in an ice cube tray. They can later be stored in plastic bags for use in flavoring soup and sauces.

Herb vinegars are an extremely popular use for homegrown herbs. To make herb vinegar: place herbs in a jar or bottle and cover with white vinegar and secure with a tight lid, storing the bottle in a cool, dry place. After steeping for 4 to 6 weeks, the vinegar can be poured off into smaller bottles and capped.

Herb butter can be made with the addition of about 4 tablespoons full of dried herb leaves and a dash of lemon juice to 1/4 pound of butter softened at room temperature. The butter should then be stored in the refrigerator in a covered container.

Herb mustard is a mixture of 8 tablespoonful of dry mustard, 8 tablespoonful of salt and a teaspoonful of sugar with just enough vinegar to make a smooth paste. The mixture should then be divided into four portions; into each portion mix one tablespoonful of desired herbs.

Potpourri is a mixture of dried herbs and flower petals that preserves the aromatic fragrances of the summer months. Most potpourris start with dried roses and lavender as a base, to which other dried herbs are added. The herbs used depends on personal preference and availability; some popular choices include: sweet basil, lemon verbena, sweet marjoram, lemon balm, scented geranium, rosemary, thyme and mint. To make a potpourri: begin by mixing 4 to 6 cupfuls of various dried petals and leaves in a large bowl. Add a tablespoonful of whole cloves, cinnamon or ginger. To blend the herbs and to make them last, add a fixative such as calamus root, benzoin or orris root. Only one ounce is needed per batch. The mixture should be stored in jars with tight-fitting lids, and be shaken or stirred occasionally. After 4 or 5 weeks, the potpourri mixture should be well blended and can be placed in ornamental canisters or sachets.

## Drying Herbs

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At the end of the season, garden herbs may be dried and stored for use during the winter.

Herbs should be air-dried in a dark place that never gets hotter than 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

The best, dried herbs come from the tender and most flavorful leaves from the upper 6-inches of stalk.

Cut herbs on a sunny morning after the dew has been burned off. The best plants are those that have just begun to bloom. Leave most of the stem on when cutting herbs and remove tough leaves growing lower than 6-inches on the stalk. Take off blossom heads.

Wash herbs in cold water, drain and blot dry with a single layer of cheesecloth. Place them in a dry, SHADY place until the leaves are so dry that they crumble when handled. Herbs dried in the shade have better color and flavor than sun dried herbs.

Leafy stems may be tied in bunches and hung in a well-ventilated, dust-free room to dry.

## Particular Herb Types

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Herb	Type	Harvesting and Preserving	Uses
Anise	Annual	The green leaves can be cut off whenever the plants are large enough. The seeds are ready when they turn brown. Wash in warm water, drain thoroughly and allow to air dry.	The leaves can be used in salads, soups, beverages, meats, game and poultry. The seeds are used to flavor cakes, breads and cookies. Leaves and seeds also add a delightful scent to sachets and potpourris.

<b>Herb</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Harvesting and Preserving</b>	<b>Uses</b>
Basil, Sweet	Annual	For fresh use - harvest the leaves as they mature, about 2 weeks after planting. For dry use - harvest leaves just before the plant blooms.	One of the most popular herbs, used mainly with tomato and egg dishes, stews, soups and salads, but also with many vegetable, poultry and meat dishes.
Caraway	Biennial	The seeds are harvested after they turn a gray-brown color. Scald the seeds in boiling water, then dry thoroughly.	Use the seeds in breads, cakes, cookies, potato salad and baked fruit (apples, for example). Also can be used in Hungarian-type dishes, coleslaw, sauerkraut, cheese spread, meat stews and fish casseroles.
Chervil	Annual	For fresh use – pick the tips of stems once a month. For dry use – harvest the leaves just before the blossoms open. Dry on trays.	Use fresh leaves the same as you would parsley, such as in: salads, salad dressings, soups, egg dishes and cheese soufflés.
Chives	Perennial	Leaves can be harvested any time during the growing season. Cut them off close to the ground. Can be pureed with water in a blender and frozen in ice cube trays.	Chives add a mild onion-like flavor to dips, spreads, soups, salads, omelets, casseroles and many kinds of vegetables.
Coriander	Annual	The leaves, which are used fresh, can be cut for seasoning as soon as the plants are 4 to 6-inches tall. The seeds can be harvested when the heads turn brown.	Coriander seeds smell and last much like a mixture of sage and orange and can be used in baking, poultry dressings and French salad dressings. Much used in Chinese, Middle Eastern and Latin American cuisine.
Dill	Annual	The fresh leaves can be harvested as needed and used as seasoning. Seed heads should be harvested when the seeds ripen to a light brown color.	Leaves and seed heads are most commonly used in the making of dill pickles. The leaves also add a characteristic flavor to salads, cottage cheese, soups, fish dishes, omelets, sauces and vegetable casseroles. Dill seeds are sometimes used in pastries, sauces, sauerkraut dishes and for flavoring vinegar.
Fennel	Tender Perennial	The leaves can be harvested and used fresh. Fennel seeds are harvested when the seed heads turn brown. Dry in a paper bag. Florence fennel is harvested when the bulbs are large enough.	The anise-flavored leaves and seeds of this herb are widely used in fish dishes, cheese spreads and vegetable dishes. The leaves and stems can be used in much the same way as celery. Florence fennel bulbs are used in salads or as the main ingredient in a salad.
Lavender	Perennial	The whole flower spikes are cut just before the florets are fully open and when color and fragrance are at their best.	Lavender is most often used in sachets, perfumes and potpourris.
Lovage	Perennial	Harvest young, tender leaves and use fresh. You can dry or freeze the leaves for later use.	Use the celery-flavored herb in soups, stews, potato salad, meat and vegetable dishes. It can also be eaten raw like celery. Its seeds are sometimes used in salads, candies, breads and cakes.

<b>Herb</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Harvesting and Preserving</b>	<b>Uses</b>
Marjoram, Sweet	Annual	Cut back to 1-inch above the ground just before flowering; a second crop will form for later use. Easily dried or frozen.	Use Marjoram leaves with meat, poultry, vegetable dishes (especially green beans), potato salad and egg dishes.
Mints	Perennial	Harvest before flowering and use fresh or dried. Cut off near the ground level. A second cutting can be harvested later on.	Used primarily for flavoring. The leaves are often put into teas and other beverages, as well as lamb sauces and jellies.
Oregano	Perennial	Harvest and dry before flowering occurs.	Oregano imparts a sharper flavor than Sweet Marjoram. It is used to season spaghetti sauces and tomato dishes. Its flowers are attractive in summer arrangements.
Parsley	Biennial	Snip young leaves just above the ground level, as needed.	Use as a garnish in soups, salads, meats and poultry.
Rosemary	Tender Perennial	Harvest the young tender leaves, but avoid taking off more than one-third of the plant at one time. For drying – harvest just before the plant flowers.	A gourmet seasoning for meats, poultry dishes and potatoes. Use either fresh or dried.
Sage	Perennial	Harvest when just starting to flower and use either fresh or dried.	A commonly used seasoning for meats, stuffing, soups and salads.
Summer, Savory	Annual	You can gather young stem tips early, but when the plant begins to flower, harvest the entire plant and dry.	Used to flavor fresh garden beans, vinegar, soups, stuffing and rice.
Tarragon, French	Perennial	Harvest Tarragon in June for steeping in vinegar. For drying – harvest in early to mid-July.	Often used in various sauces such as tartar and white sauce and for making herb vinegar.
Thyme	Perennial	Put leafy stem ends and flowers when plants are at the full-flowering stage. Use fresh, hang-dry or freeze.	Used in combination with other herbs. Leaves can be used with meats, soups, sauces and egg dishes.

SOURCE:

"Harvesting and Drying Herbs"

by James C. Schmidt and Dianne Noland

Department of Horticulture, University of Illinois

at Urbana-Champaign, Cooperative Extension Service,

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