

Year Round Gardening

Growing and Harvesting Herbs

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Many gardeners are enjoying fresh herbs from their gardens now but, if preserved by one of several easy methods, they can also be used after the first frost and when snow is on the ground. Although it is currently too late in the season to plant most herbs (an exception is coriander also known as cilantro which germinates quickly), it's not too late to be thinking about how to over-winter your perennial herbs, or to start planning now to include these rewarding plants in your garden and kitchen next year.

Gardeners find herbs easy to grow, rewarding and fun. Many herbs are drought tolerant, hardy, and beneficial in the garden as they attract many pollinators. Herbs can be grown for their color, texture, flowers and/or fragrance, so consider adding them in your flower border for that purpose. Some herbs, such as fennel and dill, have lacy foliage and flowers the complement bolder shapes, and thyme is suitable for use as an edging plant.

Containers are ideal for growing herbs since they can be positioned in or around the kitchen, where they are convenient for picking, or placed near doorways and garden seats to release a welcoming fragrance.

When using containers remember that adequate drainage is all-important. Also, containers will need water daily in the summer and fertilizer

once a week, whereas feeding herbs that are growing in good garden soil is not essential.



Photo courtesy of Debra Othitis

Although there are many herbs that are used for medicinal, aromatic or decorative purposes, culinary herbs are the most frequently encountered herbs. A culinary herb is

a plant from which you gather and use leaves, seeds, fruits, flowers, buds, bark or roots for seasoning, flavorings, scents and enrichment of certain foods to make them fresher tasting and more aromatic. Herbs are healthy too, containing many vitamins and minerals.

Herbs can be either annual (completing their life cycle in one year), perennial (growing for more than one season), or biennial (a flowering plant that takes two years to complete its biological lifecycle). Annual herbs include coriander, chervil, basil and dill and these should be started from seed. Perennial herbs include chives, marjoram, oregano, mint, sage, and thyme, and most of these are started from young plants although chives will also grow well from seed. To over-winter perennials, the crown of the plant should be protected with a loose covering of straw and the plant should be watered occasionally to reduce the chance of winterkill. Parsley is a biennial and if you let it go to seed the second year, it may become invasive. It can be started from seed or from a seedling.

The best time to harvest herbs is when they are at their peak for flavor. You can test this by tasting and/or smelling the herb, but as a general rule they should be harvested just before the flowers first open. Gather your herbs in the early morning after the dew has evaporated to minimize wilting, and avoid harvesting later than 10:00 a.m. as transpiration occurs after that time. (Transpiration is the process by which moisture is carried through plants from roots to small pores on the underside of leaves, where it changes to vapor and is released to the atmosphere. In simple terms, transpiration is essentially the uptake of nutrients from the soil and evaporation of water from plant leaves.)

Harvest herbs down to two sets of true leaves as this has added benefits of preventing your herbs from bolting while also encouraging new growth on your herb plants. When harvesting seeds from dill, fennel & coriander, wait until the seeds have turned from green to gray or brown in color.

Herbs can be preserved for use throughout the year by drying or freezing. For more information about how to preserve culinary herbs, see <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/nutrition-food-safety-health/herbs-preserving-and-using-9-335/>

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by keying in ask.extension.org any time day or night. Monday to Thursday from 9 a.m. – 12 p.m. you can phone 520-7684 or emailing CSUmg2@elpasoco.com .

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