

INFORMATION

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Herb Guide



Herbs are plants to serve & delight us. They can be used in herbal decorations, health & beauty, fragrant gardens or in the kitchen. Many people begin with an interest in cooking with herbs, perhaps fuelled by holidays abroad. This may lead to the study of the herbs health enhancing properties. Others may be interested in growing herbs and having created a herb garden, may find an unexpected further pleasure in the individual herbs, their fresh scents and their many uses.

Herbs are delicious and can transform an ordinary dish into a culinary delight. They are also very beautiful, both in the garden and as fresh simple decorations indoors.

SOIL PREPARATION

Many herbs can survive on poor, stony ground, but few can cope with water logged soil. Ideally, they prefer a light open soil which is well aerated, yet able to retain moisture and nutrients. A light, free draining sandy soil does not hold moisture and is usually low in nutrients. Although the Mediterranean herbs can survive on such a soil, others, such as mint and chives, may benefit from the addition of compost, or a well rotted straw based manure, to help retain moisture and supply nutrients. Peat helps to retain moisture but it does not contribute nutrients and may make the soil too acidic if used in large quantities. Most herbs are like vegetables in their preference for a slightly alkaline soil. If your soil is too acidic, add a sprinkling of lime. Use the lowest amount recommended.



TRANSFERRING HERBS

Many herbs will not survive a cold winter if left outdoors, but by being brought indoors in pots, annuals can have their lives extended by some months and less hardy perennials often benefit too. At the first sign of crisp Autumn air, basil should be brought indoors. Pale, mottled or otherwise unhappy leaves may be signalling the plants displeasure at cold evenings. Before a heavy frost, pineapple sage, fringed lavender, pelargoniums, balm of Gilead and Crete dittany need to be brought indoors. All will reward your efforts with aromatic leaves & occasionally with winter blossoms.

In colder climates with longer periods of frost & snow, rosemary, sage, winter savoury, curry plant, lavender and the more delicate thymes should be brought indoors to survive the winter. Protect mature plants that winter outside by layering soil, straw or compost around their roots.

If you grow herbs in pots all year, it's much easier to bring them inside. Trim any roots which may have grown through the base, or pot on if the maximum size pot has not yet been reached. Try to make the transfer whilst outdoor and indoor temperatures are similar.



PICKING HERBS

The way you pick leaves for use can make a plant grow bushier. Basil, tarragon, marjoram, oregano and the evergreens maintain a bushier shape if the growing tip is pinched out first - then pick the larger side leaves. In general, do not remove more than a fifth of the total leaves of a herb before allowing the plant time to re-grow.

Mint produces small side leaves if the top is snipped off, but it is better to cut off a whole stem as the plant responds with more succulent growth.

Pick the outer leaves of parsley, sorrel, lovage and salad burnet to encourage continuing growth. If one of these plants produces a strong central stem as a prelude to flowering, remove it straight away. Parsley is biennial and produces the best leaves in its first season.

Small sprigs of rosemary, thyme, sage & winter savoury can be picked on an aesthetic basis: remove pieces which spoil the look of the herb.

Chives & Welsh onions can be cut down to one & a half inches (4cm) and then allowed to re-grow. Less is wasted if cut down to this size (instead of nipping a layer off the top of the plant at a time) as each blade yellows for a further inch or two after each cutting.

PRESERVING & STORING HERBS

Most herbs will wilt soon after cutting. Putting them in a jar of water out of the sun helps for an hour or so but to keep picked herbs such as parsley fresh for a few days, place them in a plastic bag filled with air and tightly secured. Store in a refrigerator and they should remain in good condition for several days.

DRYING HERBS

The sooner drying begins after picking, the better the quality and colour of the dried herb will be. Drying leaves in the oven is not satisfactory as the water evaporates too quickly and essential oils are lost. Microwave ovens do speed up the process considerably without affecting the flavour of the herbs but they may destroy some of the therapeutic properties in the process. Keep herbs quite separate when drying to avoid any confusion or tainting.

