



CULINARY HERB GARDENING

Herbs are easy to grow. Anyone who can successfully grow lettuce or lupine, carrots or chrysanthemums, radishes or roses, can grow herbs. Yet, just as there are requirements for producing home-grown vegetables and flowers, so are there specific needs for the maintenance of herbs.

Generally, in Massachusetts herbs should be treated as annuals, particularly in areas subject to winters with zero to sub-zero temperatures. Sage, mint, thyme, and chives are exceptions. Most herb seed germinate readily; small potted plants are readily available at garden centers. Mature plants can withstand drying conditions; however, they do need watering during prolonged drought.

Maintaining a small herb garden takes a little work. Friable, fertile soil and good drainage are essential, and a sunny location is preferable. The garden need not be large: a few short rows incorporated into the vegetable garden, border plantings for your flower garden, small plants in window boxes, or just a patch beside the kitchen door. A few plants of each desired species will be sufficient for the average-size family's needs. Remember, herbs have strong aromas and flavors -- little more than a pinch should ever be used in flavoring. Most herbs are relatively pest and disease free.

When planning an herb garden, consider the mature growth habits of the selected species (tall or short, spreading or upright), and the growing season length of each species. Some herbs die with the first touch of frost while others survive up to solid freezing.

Before preparing your garden, have the soil tested for acidity and fertilizing requirements. In general, a pH reading of 6.2 to 6.7 favors good growth of garden plants, but herbs prefer more alkalinity, growing well in soil with pH readings of 7.0 to 7.2. Use lime to adjust a low pH upward. Acidity rating: 7.0 is neutral, any reading below that is an acid reaction; any reading higher than 7.0 is alkaline. Ground limestone may be used in either spring or fall, is slowly available to plants and soil, and will not burn.

Manures may be used for feeding herbs; a dried cow manure product is recommended over other manures. Commercial fertilizers with a 5-10-5 formulation can also be used in place of manure at rates recommended on the bag's label.

Add organic material such as compost along with the lime and fertilizer; turn in thoroughly, and with a spade, dig deep into the soil. If mint is to be included in your garden, be sure to put in metal restraining bands such as those used to edge lawns. One inch of metal should show above the soil level to keep these spreading plants from wandering. Consider growing mint in a container instead of in the ground.

Plan your garden on paper, keeping in mind the growth habits of the herbs you want to grow, and in the spring, you may anticipate a pleasant afternoon's work. With garden plan, seed and identification labels in hand, plant seed at a depth four times the seed's diameter. Cover with fine soil, firm in place, and gently water.



If you are transplanting seedlings or young plants, put them in late afternoon, early evening, or on a cloudy day because they wilt readily after transplanting under hot sun. Place the plants in watered, drained holes that have been dug deep enough to accommodate the root and soil ball. Fill the hole with soil to the same level on the plant's stem as it was in the flat before transplanting. Keep the garden moist for the next few days to help establish the roots.

Fresh herbs are used as garnish on salads, with shellfish, in casseroles, dips, and salads. Dried herbs flavor stews, soup, meat, and chowders, and many substitute in salads when fresh greens are not available.

Herb flavors are retained longer if the harvested plant parts are cut at the right time, cured, and stored properly. Tender young leaves may be used all during the growing season. To harvest for drying, pick the leaves when flowering begins, and dry as quickly as possible in an airy, dry, heated, and darkened area, such as an attic. This will keep the green color in the leaves and prevent molding. Harvest seeds when they are brown. Herbs such as rosemary and thyme can be partially sun-dried without losing color, but do not overexpose them.

When the plant parts are thoroughly dry, discard the debris of old stems. Pack the dried herbal material into dark glass or metal containers with tight-fitting tops. This will preserve those essential oils that give delicious flavors and aromas.

Try growing some of these herbs as potted house plants for winter use. They are decorative as well as flavorful. Chives, parsley, and sweet basil are suggestions. Consider your geraniums as herbs too. Rather than trying to pot the entire plant from the garden, start your new house plants from cuttings or root divisions. When well established in pots, place them where they will receive plenty of sunlight.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)

Description: Basil is an attractive annual, about 18 inches tall, that has light-green, broad leaves. The flowers are small, white, and appear in spikes. There are several species of basil, including one with purple leaves.

Culture: Basil grows easily from seed planted after all danger of frost has passed. Pinch stems to promote bushy, compact growth. Avoid lush growth as it may reduce flavor. For earlier harvest, start basil indoors under lights in April.

Harvesting: Green leaves can be picked about 6 weeks following planting. It is best to cut leaves for drying just before flowers open.

Use: Spicy-scented basil leaves are one of the most popular of all herbs used in cooking. Cooks favor basil for tomato dishes in either fresh or dried form.

Borage (*Borago officinalis*)

Description: Borage is a decorative annual with coarse, very hairy leaves and stems and beautiful sky-blue flowers in a star-shape. The plant grows about 2 to 3 feet tall.

Culture: Borage is easily grown from seed and will sow itself. This plant does best in dry, sunny places. Although it is difficult to transplant, you can stretch out the harvest by sowing three times at 4-week intervals.

Harvesting: Pick blossoms as they open. Use leaves fresh anytime; they are seldom dried.

Use: Sprays of borage flowers and leaves are used to give a cool, cucumber-like flavor to summer drinks. Bees are attracted to the borage plant.

Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*)

Description: Chervil is an annual plant that grows up to 2 feet in height. It has lacy leaves resembling parsley but in a lighter shade of green. The flat heads have delicate white flowers.

Culture: Chervil can be raised from seed sown in the garden in early spring. Seedlings are difficult to transplant. Thin plants to 3 to 4 inches apart. For denser foliage, cut the flower stems before bloom.

Harvesting: Pick leaves just before the buds break. Cut and dry the green, tender leaves.

Use: Chervil leaves are used much as is parsley -- in soups, salads, sauces, egg dishes, and cheese soufflés.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

Description: Chives are small, dainty, onion-like plants that grow in clumps reaching about 10 inches in height. They are a hardy-perennial with decorative, light purple flowers.

Culture: Chives demand little care other than dividing when they become overcrowded. They are easily propagated by division or from seed and make attractive border plants. Deadhead to reduce unwanted seedlings.

Harvesting: Cut fresh leaves for use as they grow.

Use: Chives are used to impart a delicious, subtle, onion-like flavor to foods.

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)

Description: Dill, a popular annual, has bluish-green stems that contrast with finely divided, yellow-green, plume-like leaves and yellowish flowers. Dill grows about 2 to 3 feet high.

Culture: Dill is easily grown from seed sown in the garden in spring after all danger of frost has passed. Sow the seed where you want it to grow as it is difficult to transplant. Stake tall plants.

Harvesting: For best results, pick leaves just as flowers open. Pick seeds when they are flat and brown.

Use: Both the leaves and seeds of dill are popular for flavoring pickles, sauerkraut, and beet dishes. It can be combined with garlic and pepper to produce a highly flavored Mediterranean or East European pork roast (often cooked over a spit outdoors). The seeds yield fragrant oil.

Garlic (*Allium sativum*)

Description: A bulb growing 18 inches high with leaves resembling gladiolus.

Culture: Garlic produces a group of cloves, encased in a sheath rather than a single bulb. Separate the cloves for planting. The larger outer cloves produce the best garlic. Plant garlic in fall (September) or spring (May). Fall-planted garlic and spring-planted garlic are harvested at approximately the same time, but the fall-planted will be larger. Plant cloves with points up in rows 12" apart spaced 5" to 6" apart. Fall-planted cloves should be planted 2" deep so frost will not heave them out of the soil; spring-planted garlic need only be planted 1" deep.

Harvesting: Harvest garlic when the tops begin to turn brown. To prepare garlic for long term storage, cure the bulbs for 4 to 6 weeks in a warm, dry, shady location where there is very good air circulation. Pile bulbs no more than 2" to 3" deep. The purpose is to toughen the outside skin and drive out all moisture beneath the outer scales to prevent decay. After curing, store in a cool, dry, well-ventilated spot. When properly stored, garlic can be kept for many months.

Use: Garlic can be used as a seasoning for meat, vegetables, and cheese dishes.

Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*)

Description: Lovage is a hardy perennial with large, rich green leaves that resemble those of celery. The leaves are stronger tasting but sweeter than celery.

Culture: Lovage does best in a rich, moist soil and can be propagated from seed planted in late summer.

Harvesting: Use the leaves fresh, or dry them at any time.

Use: The leaves and stems of Lovage give a celery flavor to soups and salads. Blanch stem bases before eating.

Sweet marjoram (*Majorana hortensis*)

Description: Sweet marjoram, usually grown as an annual, is one of the most fragrant and popular of all herbs. Its growth habit is low and spreading, and it reaches a height of about 8 to 12 inches. It has small, oval, gray-green leaves that are velvety to the touch.

Culture: This plant can be easily grown from seed or cuttings. In colder climates, it is best treated as an annual or kept over winter as a pot plant. Its color makes it an attractive border plant.

Harvesting: Sweet marjoram leaves can be used anytime. Cut the leafy stems as flowering begins and dry for future use.

Use: Sweet marjoram leaves, fresh or dried, can be used as a flavoring in cooking. The oil derived from the leaves is used in making perfume.

Mint (*Mentha* spp.)

Description: A hardy perennial with many different species. Some examples include spearmint (*Mentha spicata*), orange (*M. citrata*), peppermint (*M. piperata*), apple (*M. rotundifolia*), and pineapple (*M. rotundifolia variegata*).

Culture: Mint will grow almost anywhere. It thrives in moist soil in shade or sun, grows to a height of 2 feet, and dies back with the frost. Since few pests bother it, mint spreads so rapidly that sometimes it becomes a nuisance in the garden and physical barriers are needed to contain it.

Harvest: Pick young, tender leaves for best aroma and flavor. Do not allow to flower. Allow to dry or use fresh.

Use: Mint can be used in salads, drinks, potpourri, jellies, or flower arrangements. In the garden, it can be used as a ground cover in those hard-to-plant areas.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*)

Description: Parsley is a hardy biennial that is usually treated as an annual. It is popular because of its much divided, sometimes curly leaves that have a characteristic flavor and smell.

Culture: Parsley can be grown from seed started in early spring, but it is slow to germinate.

Harvesting: Cut parsley when the leaves are suitable size. Leaves can be used fresh or dried.

Use: Parsley is one of the most familiar of all herbs and is used for both garnishing and flavoring. It is relatively high in vitamins A, C, and iron.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)

Description: Rosemary is a hardy evergreen shrub in areas where winter temperatures stay above 20 degrees F. In the Northeast, however, this perennial should be taken indoors and kept as a pot plant during winter. The narrow leaves have a leathery-like feel and a spicy, resinous fragrance.

Culture: Rosemary grows best in well-drained, sunny locations in soil containing lime. It can be propagated by cuttings or from seed. Pinch the tops to direct growth.

Harvesting: Use fresh leaves as needed.

Use: Rosemary is a popular flavoring for meats and dressings or as a garnish on large roasts. Oil from leaves is used in medicine.

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)

Description: Sage is a woody, hardy perennial plant with oblong, woolly, gray-green leaves which are lighter underneath and darker on top. Sage grows 2 to 3 feet or more in height and has a tendency to sprawl.

Culture: Start from seed or cuttings. A slow starter, sow seed indoors and transplant. Plant sage where it will receive full sun. Space plants 2 to 2 1/2 feet apart. Plants eventually become woody and should be renewed every 3 to 4 years.

Harvesting: Pick the leaves before or at blooming. Cut back the stems after blooming.

Use: This aromatic and slightly bitter herb is noted for its use in stuffing for poultry, rabbit, pork, and baked fish. It also can be used in sausage or meat loaves.

Summer savory (*Saturja hortensis*)

Description: Summer savory is a tender annual that grows to a height of up to 18 inches. It has small bronze-green leaves and very small white or lavender flowers. The leaves are pungent and spicy.

Culture: Summer savory grows best in a well-worked loamy soil. Seed can be planted in the garden in spring.

Harvesting: Cut leafy tops when the plants are in bud. Hang in an airy, shaded place until crisp and dry.

Use: Summer savory is popular as a condiment with meats and vegetables and is generally considered sweeter than winter savory.

Tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*)

Description: Tarragon is an herbaceous perennial that grows to a height of about 2 feet. It has multi-branched growth with narrow, somewhat twisted, green leaves.

Culture: Tarragon will grow in full sun but seems to do better in semi-shade. It can be propagated from root cuttings or by division. It needs protection in winter in cold climates. Make new plantings every 3 to 4 years.

Harvesting: It is best to use fresh young leaves and stem tips. Flavor is lost when dried.

Use: Tarragon leaves have a distinctive flavor similar to anise and are used in salads, marinades, and sauces. Leaves

yield flavor to vinegar when steeped.

English thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)

Description: Thyme is a low-growing, wiry stemmed perennial that reaches about 6 to 10 inches in height. The stems are stiff and woody and leaves are small, oval, and gray-green in color. The lilac flowers are borne in small clusters and leaves are very aromatic.

Culture: This plant grows best in light, well-drained soil. Plant thyme 8" to 1' apart. Renew the plants every few years. Propagate with cuttings, divisions, or by direct seeding. Thyme is an attractive edging plant or spread among and over rocks.

Harvesting: Cut leafy tops and flower clusters when first blossoms open and dry.

Use: Thyme is widely used as seasoning. Oil of thyme is used in medicines and perfumes. It goes well in gumbos, bouillabaisse, clam chowder, poultry stuffing, and slow-cooking beef dishes.