

How to Grow Cooking Herbs

Grow your own cooking herbs to add fresh zest and flavor to your menus year-round!

Is It a Cooking Herb or a Spice?

The first thing to know in selecting which herbs to grow is the difference between cooking (culinary) herbs and spices. The cinnamon stick you put in your hot chocolate or apple cider is a spice while the parsley on the edge of your plate is an herb.

1. Cooking herbs are usually the fresh or dried leaves of plants while spices are the ground seeds, roots, fruits, flowers, and/or bark.
2. Herbs grow very well in temperate zones, while spices generally come from tropical areas.
3. Herbs add subtle flavor, whereas spices are generally more pungent and add more robust flavor.

Herbs run the gamut of about 70 cultivars, broken into categories of medicinal, ornamental, and aromatic as well as culinary or cooking herbs. To start growing cooking herbs, it's best first to select where and how you want to grow them.

Site Selection

Most cooking herbs thrive in just about any location that gives them plenty of light, good drainage and nutrition. In addition to outdoor garden spots, culinary herbs can be grown in patio containers, as indoor herb gardens, or in greenhouses using soil-less growing techniques like hydroponics or aquaponics.

Outdoor Cooking Herb Gardens

For easy access, plant your herb garden as close to your kitchen as possible. Herbs grown in full sun have denser foliage, darker color, and higher levels of the essential oils that add flavor to your recipes. Good air circulation and drainage are also important to the success of your cooking herb garden. The size of your cooking herb garden, of course, depends on the space you have available for growing. Generally, an area 20 by 4 feet accommodates a satisfactory variety of cultivars.

Many herbs overlap in category. Border your cooking herb garden with some cultivars that have ornamental or aromatic qualities as well as the culinary. However, remember that the main purpose of this garden is for use in your kitchen. Place cooking herbs that you use frequently in less conspicuous areas so that you won't leave big holes in your garden when you harvest them for cooking!

Most culinary herbs thrive under the same growth conditions as the vegetables they enhance and as such are a natural addition to your vegetable garden. Some cooking herbs even have properties that repel common insect pests and garden diseases, which is an added benefit to your vegetables.

The best time to amend soil with nutrient rich compost is when you till your garden plot. Herbs have coarse roots that benefit from chunky organic matter, which helps excess water drain away and also helps provide good air circulation. After planting your cooking herbs, skirting them with a two to three-inch layer of mulch helps soil retain moisture. In addition, composting and mulching helps you maintain the neutral to slightly alkaline soil that most herbs prefer.

Growing Cooking Herbs in Containers

Although container-grown plants usually need more frequent watering and fertilization, pests and disease problems are virtually eliminated. Growing cooking herbs in containers is ripe with advantages.

- Tender herbs grown in containers are easily brought indoors during winter months.
- Pots can be moved to more desirable locations when weather dictates: into the shade when it's too hot and into the sun as the season progresses and sunny areas become overshadowed by trees, shrubs, or walls.
- Using containers and a plant stand gives you more space for more variety in addition to letting you garden while standing upright.
- Containers keep invasive plants (like mint) in their place.
- Containers can be sunk into your garden, providing your plant with a weed barrier and offering it some relief from competing with invasive plants.

When planting an herb pot, select a container with at least a one-gallon capacity. Instead of compost, one part perlite to three parts nutrient rich potting soil gives herbs the drainage they need. Plant only one variety of cooking herb per container, strawberry pots being the exception to the rule.

Indoors

The easiest way to learn how to grow cooking herbs is in an indoor culinary garden. Most annual cooking herbs and some perennials adapt well to indoor growing. Dwarf varieties and those that reach only a foot in height may be grown in pots as small as six inches in diameter. When given adequate light and proper care, they'll provide you with fresh sprigs of cooking herbs year round.

Indoor culinary herb gardens have less risk of being attacked by diseases and pests than outdoor gardens and allow you to completely control watering, light, and fertilization.

Most potted herbs thrive in any good potting mixture in a container that provides good drainage. Easily supplement light requirements with a either a grow light or a simple fluorescent fixture. Plant herbs in two parts potting soil with one part perlite or coarse sand. An inch of small gravel in the pot bottom ensures good drainage for your culinary herbs. Periodic fertilization, yearly repotting, regular watering (according to the requirements of the plant) and occasional pruning is all you need do to maintain your indoor herb garden indefinitely.

Soil-less growing

Hydroponic and aquaponic herb growing are two of the soil-less methods many environmentally conscious herb gardeners are substituting for traditional soil-based herb cultivation.

Hydroponic herbs grow up to 50% faster than soil-based plants. Aquaponics is the combination of aquaculture and hydroponics where nutrient rich fish water is pumped from fish tank into herb garden bed. Plants growing in gravel extract the nutrients and the water drains back into the fish tank clean and freshly oxygenated. Growing herbs using aquaponics can be as simple as pumping water between a small goldfish aquarium and some gravel filled herb pots.

Selecting Cooking Herbs

Now that you know your options on where and how to grow cooking herbs, it's time to choose which herbs to grow! An easy way to choose cultivars is to purchase a culinary herb garden kit. In addition to allowing you to grow a variety of your favorite cooking herbs, a culinary herb kit is also an affordable way to experiment with new cultivars and add new tastes to your recipes. However, if you're selective, here's a list of some of the most popular cooking herbs and how they grow.

Annual Cooking Herbs

- **Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)**

Sweet basil is one of the most popular herbs used in cooking and grows easily from seed sown directly in the garden after all danger of frost has passed.

Sweet basil reaches about 18 inches in height. However, there are many basil cultivars and some reach up to three feet tall! Typical spacing for basil plants is 12 inches between plants, and two to three feet between rows.

Pinching basil stems promotes bushy, compact growth. Quick to harvest, leaves can be cut as early as 6 weeks following planting. Cut basil, leaving four to six leaves above ground. Remove flower spikes before bloom to ensure good leaf production and full flavor.

- **Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*)**

Except for its lighter green leaves, chervil closely resembles parsley and is used in much the same way.

Like many other annual herbs, chervil seed can be sown directly into the garden when all danger of frost is past. Chervil grows up to 24 inches tall. Small seedlings should be thinned to three to four inches apart.

Harvest chervil leaves just before flowers blossom. To keep foliage dense, remove flowers before they bloom.

- **Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*)**

Cilantro is widely used in both Latin and Southeast Asian dishes but is not to be confused with Vietnamese coriander (*Polygonum odoratum*) which is a perennial. Still as well as using the greens, cilantro seed can be ground and then is known as the spice, coriander.

Cilantro goes to seed quickly when temperatures rise. Sow seeds directly into the garden at two-week intervals to keep a fresh supply of cilantro. Plants grow to about 2-foot tall, but leaves can be harvested when the plant reaches about 6 inches in height. Thin seedlings to 7 to 10-inches apart.

- **Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)**

Probably the most popular use of this fragrant herb is in dill pickles. However, the slender shoots also make a tasty addition to salads, vegetables, and main dishes like fish. .

Sow seed into the garden when all danger of frost has passed in spring. Dill grows about 2 to 3 feet high and quickly goes to seed in the summer heat. Pick stems just as flowers bloom.

Dill is a prolific reseeder. Seeds can be used either dried or fresh.

Swallowtail butterfly larva (large green caterpillars) feed on dill, so it's best to plant more than you believe you'll use!

- **Marjoram (*Origanum majorana*)**

When looking for sweet marjoram, you may find it classed as *Majorana hortensis* and *Majorana majorana* as well as *Origanum majorana*.

This petite annual reaches only 12-inches in height. Although often substituted for oregano, a pleasing fragrance and velvety gray foliage make sweet marjoram a popular favorite as an ornamental herb as well as a culinary herb.

Sow seeds outdoors in early spring when soil temperatures reach about 60°F. Sweet marjoram is also a naturally sweet addition to an indoor herb garden.

- **Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*)**

Parsley is actually a biennial, but you'll have the best luck growing it if you treat it as an annual and plant it every spring.

Although it is aggravatingly slow at germinating, the best way to propagate parsley is through seed. For best results start seeds indoors six to eight weeks before you expect the last frost.

Since it reaches only a foot tall, parsley is also an excellent plant for your indoor herb garden.

- **(Summer) Savory (*Satureja hortensis*)**

Savory comes in both perennial and the annual *summer* savory. Summer savory grows up to 18 inches tall. Foliage is green with a bronze tone and a peppery flavor that makes a "spicy" herbal addition to cooking.

Sow summer savory seed into your spring herb garden. Because of its petite size, summer savory is also a candidate for indoor culinary herb gardens.

Perennial Cooking Herbs

- **Bay Laurel (*Laurus nobilis*)**

Bay laurel is a small evergreen tree and the source of the bay leaf. Frequently not hardy as a young plant, bay laurel is an excellent choice for container growing. They require an annual pruning to keep them from reaching their standard 40-foot height. However, generally the size of the pot controls the size of tree. When planted in a one-foot diameter pot, the bay laurel generally reaches only about five feet in height. With only regular waterings, bi-monthly fertilization, and annual top dressing of compost or nutrient rich soil, the bay laurel will thrive in the same container for up to six years.

Move pots indoors in winter in a cool area where they receive indirect light.

Bay laurels are normally available in autumn or mid-spring from nurseries and garden centers.

- **Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)**

Native to the Orient, chives betray their flavor with a distinctive yet subtle onion-like fragrance.

Propagated easily by seed or division, chives grow in grassy clumps from 10 to 18-inches tall and are prolific at self-seeding when allowed to go to seed. Harvest chive leaves at about 2 inches from the ground. As with many other herbs, its best to harvest chives before they go to bloom.

Garlic chives (*Allium tuberosum*) have a garlic sent and flavor. Their leaves are flatter and longer than those of *A. schoenoprasum*. After harvest, preserve either type of chives by either drying or freezing.

- **Fennel (*Foeniculum officinalis*)**

Fennel is a perennial herb that looks like dill, but has a very distinctive licorice scent and flavor.

Fennel is best grown in a patio pot place in full sun. The herb grows up to 4 feet tall and self-seeds to the point of being quite invasive.

Use young fennel leaves with fish, Italian dishes. Seeds are used in many sauces and also to flavor sausage.

Like dill, fennel also attracts swallowtail butterflies.

- **Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*)**

Lemon grass is an aromatic tropical grass that provides the subtle taste and smell of lemon with a bright edge of ginger.

Lemon grass grows in cascading clumps that can reach up to 6-feet high and 3-feet in diameter. It's usually propagated by bulb planting or division of a mature clump.

The sharp blades are ready for harvest when they are about ¼ to ½ inch in diameter.

- **Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*)**

Sweeten up your turkey stuffing, soup, or salad with lovage.

Similar to celery in taste, but sweeter and with a more robust flavor, lovage can reach to six feet in height.

The usual way to propagate lovage is through division, but it can also be grown from seed sown in late summer or very early spring. Once established, lovage readily self-seeds and is hardy in zones 4 to 8.

- **Mint (*Mentha*)**

Many a gardener has fallen in love with the fragrances of fresh mint cultivars, only to find that in a season or two, their garden is overrun with the stuff!

Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) and peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*) are the two most popular mints to grow. Almost all mints are hardy perennials, vigorous growers, and diligent reseederers. Although their fragrance is absolutely wonderful, mint really does need its own little corner of the world. One way to keep mint in check is to regularly harvest leaves before it has a chance to blossom.

Propagate mint by division and plant transplants in sunken clay pots to keep them from spreading out of bounds!

- **Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*)**

Oregano, although known as wild marjoram, has coarser leaves and a fragrance more similar to thyme than sweet marjoram.

Plants grow to two feet in height and adapt well to containers. Although oregano is a perennial, beds need to be replanted every three to four years when stems become woody. Propagate oregano either by seed or by division.

Unlike most cooking herbs, oregano leaves are their most flavorful after they have been dried.

- **Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)**

The quickest way to grow rosemary is from small plants purchased at your favorite nursery. Although rosemary seed can be sown directly into the garden, seed is slow to germinate and beginning growth is slow as well.

Because rosemary is hardy in only warmer climates (zones 8 – 10), most gardeners prefer to grow it in outdoor pots and bring it indoors during the cold season. However, before bringing rosemary indoors, do remember to acclimate it in a “reverse” hardening off. Bring it in for short times and set it back out again, increasing the indoor length of time slowly for a couple of weeks. Over-winter rosemary in a cool area of your home.

A mature rosemary plant can reach from 4 to 6-feet tall and be nearly as wide.

- **Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)**

The distinctive scent and flavor of sage almost spells stuffing to your senses! Sage is a popular cooking herb widely used in poultry stuffings and as a flavor for soups and stews.

Depending on cultivar, mature sage reaches from two to four feet in height. Colorful foliage that ranges from gray green to deep purple, makes sage an attractive addition to an herb garden as well as a flavorful one to your recipes.

- **(Winter) Savory (*Satureja montana*)**

Although winter savory isn't as "sweet" as summer savory, it is still a favorite herb for seasoning meat dishes. Also different from its annual relative, winter savory is a woody perennial that reaches from one to two feet-tall.

Winter savory is most often propagated from cuttings, although it also grows from seed. Nearly an evergreen, winter savory leaves can be harvested at almost any time, but best retain their pungent flavor when dried and stored for winter use.

- **Tarragon**

Tarragon is an International favorite. French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculoides*) Russian tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculoides*), and Mexican tarragon (*Tagetes lucida*) are used for seasoning vinegars, butters, rice, vegetables, and nearly all types of meat.

French tarragon is a woody perennial that reaches two feet high and is propagated from stem cuttings or division. Of the three varieties of tarragon, French tarragon is the most popular.

Russian tarragon is also a perennial but is distinguished by coarser growth and a more bitter taste than French Tarragon.

Mexican tarragon is actually the mint marigold. Because it is heat and drought resistant, it is often grown in warm climates as a substitute for French or Russian cultivars.

- **Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)**

The woody growth of this low growing perennial adds to its charm. Thyme's wiry stems generally reach no more than 10 inches high. Both the gray-green leaves and lilac tinted flowers are very aromatic, but for cooking, it's best to cut stems when the first flowers begin to bloom.

Thyme is propagated by cuttings, division, and direct seeding. Thyme is at home as a bed edging or an addition to a rock garden and is comfortable in an indoor garden as well.

Green Thumb Planting and Care Rules for Culinary Herbs

Usually when cooking herb seeds or transplants are purchased from a nursery, planting and care instructions are included on a seed packet or informational plant stake. Of course, you should follow these instructions. However, if you get your herbs from a friend, farmers' market or otherwise without instructions, they'll generally grow successfully if you follow a few rules of thumb.

Planting

1. Good gardening always starts with the soil. Most herbs grow in any fair to good grade soil. For best results, prepare outdoor areas by tilling the bed and amending the soil with some organically rich compost before sowing seed.
2. Sow seed at a depth no more than twice the size of the seed. After planting, thoroughly water seeded areas.
3. Start tiny seeds indoors to keep them from being washed away by wind and rain, gathered by birds, or eaten by earth-dwelling animals and insects. Typically, 6 to 8 weeks before you intend to transplant them outdoors is a good timeframe.
4. Plant transplants at the same depth as they were in the original container to keep stems healthy. For those that have become pot-bound, gently break the soil clump apart enough to loosen the soil and give roots a chance to spread.
5. Plant bare-root plants at two to three times the depth of the root in a hole that is two to three times its width.
6. After planting transplants or bare roots, a two to three inch layer of mulch helps control weeds and also helps retain moisture.

Care

1. Pot-grown herbs (even sunken pots) need good drainage and extra care. Be sure to check them often for dryness and water accordingly. Most plants need at least an inch of water per week.
2. Pot-grown plants need occasional fertilization. Fertilize outdoor pots at least once mid-season with a good organic fertilizer. However, be cautious in fertilization since in most cases, less is more. Over fertilization of herbs results in weak growth and reduces the oils that give the herbs flavor.
3. Regular pruning of herbs promotes fresh and vigorous growth. Use your herbs regularly to keep them pruned. Freeze or dry extra cuttings for off-season use.
4. Most herbs have little problem with pests and disease. Usually, regular weeding, proper watering, and frequent use (pruning) limits pest and disease problems with herbs.
5. Harvest herbs in the morning when moisture and fragrance are at their peak. However, wait to harvest until after dew has dried.
6. Although you can harvest cooking herbs all season, give perennials some time off in the fall to help them prepare for winter.