

GROWING AND USING HERBS

Herbs are just about the simplest plants to raise and they fit in any garden, including ornamental beds and pots on a windowsill. You can choose from so many varieties with diverse flavors and scents, attractive foliage, and pretty flowers that you are sure to find a few to grow in your garden.

Herbs are undemanding to care for if you plant them in the right conditions. For the most popular types, well-drained soil is critically important—root rot is one of the only common problems when growing herbs. If you're planting herbs in containers, be sure excess moisture can run out and avoid overwatering. Full or at least partial sun is ideal, but some tolerate more shade.

TOP PICKS

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)

The fragrant leaves on these 2-foot-tall plants have a lightly spicy flavor. A cold-sensitive annual, basil can provide a steady supply of tasty leaves from the last frost in spring to the first cold snap of fall.

Best varieties: You can pick from sweet Thai, Cuban, and lemon- or cinnamon-scented basil, as well as the more familiar Italian varieties, such as 'Profuma di Genova'.

Tip: Start trimming off (and eating) the top leaves while basil plants are small to encourage branching, which will produce a bushier, more productive plant.

Chives (*Allium spp.*)

The thin stalks come up in clumps every year, opening up pretty purple (and edible) flowers in spring followed by green, onion-flavored leaves all season long. You can dig up a small clump in fall, plant it in a small pot and keep it in a sunny, warm window to harvest as needed through the winter.

Best varieties: The most common variety of chives (*A. schoenoprasum*) has an onion flavor, while Chinese or garlic chives (*A. tuberosum*) taste more like mild garlic.

Tip: Chives grow into big, dense bunches, which you should dig up and divide every few years. Replant the divisions in new spots around your garden or share them with a friend or neighbor.

Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*)

Cilantro leaves have a fresh, citrusy flavor. The dried seeds—known as coriander—are used to season chicken dishes, curries, and more.

Best varieties: Cilantro thrives in cool conditions and when the weather gets hot the plants start forming seeds—a process known as "bolting"—and the leaves taste bitter. 'Slo-Bolt' cilantro tolerates heat longer than other varieties.

Tip: If you want young cilantro leaves to use for garden-fresh salsa when your tomatoes and peppers hit their peak of ripeness in late summer, sow the herb's seeds in midsummer.

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)

The ferny leaves of this annual are ready to harvest from the middle of spring all the way into fall. The plants are easy to grow from seeds sown directly in garden beds.

Best varieties: 'Fernleaf' stays small, so it's well-suited to growing in pots indoors on a sunny windowsill or as a border along flower beds. For bigger, bushier plants, go with 'Mammoth' (aka 'Long Island Mammoth').

Tip: Grow dill in or around your vegetable beds because the tiny yellow flowers in summer attract beneficial insects that prey on garden pests.

Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*)

The fragrant foliage of lavender would be reason enough to grow it, but it also bears purple flower spikes that appear in early summer and can last for weeks. While it is primarily grown as an ornamental plant, lavender also is prized as a natural remedy for stress. Just add sprigs of lavender to a warm bath or place a sachet of lavender in your bedroom to allow the soothing scent to be dispersed.

Best varieties: English lavenders such as 'Hidcote' and 'Munstead' are especially fragrant.

Tip: Lavender grows best and produces the most essential oil (the source of its scent) when planted in full sun and well-drained soil.





TOP PICKS

Mint (*Mentha spp.*)

The large mint family includes varieties with scents of apple, pineapple, and even chocolate. Nearly all are aggressively spreading perennials.

Best varieties: Peppermint has the most potent flavor and fragrance. Spearmint is milder. 'Mint Julep' has been bred for compatibility with its namesake drink.

Tip: To keep mint from colonizing your garden, grow it in pots that you sink into the ground to limit its roots from spreading.

Oregano (*Origanum spp.*)

A shrubby, low-growing plant with tiny, flavorful leaves, oregano fares best in very dry, sunny spots where soil fertility is low.

Best varieties: Many chefs prefer Greek oregano to other varieties. Mexican oregano has a light, citrus taste.

Tip: Oregano can be difficult to start from seeds but is very easy to grow from divisions you get from another gardener.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*)

Parsley is a biennial—meaning it has a two-year life cycle—but it is often grown as an annual that gets replaced each season.

Best varieties: Flat-leaved types, such as 'Giant Italian' have the most pronounced flavor.

The frilly foliage of curly types, such as 'Extra Curled' or 'Green River' make them a good backdrop plant for ornamental beds.

Tip: Parsley seeds are very slow to germinate, often taking weeks to come up after planting. For faster results, buy seedlings at the nursery.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)

A perennial in its native Mediterranean climate, rosemary can become a large shrub where winters are mild or in gardens where it is protected from the elements.

Best varieties: 'Blue Spires', 'Gorizia', and 'Tuscan Blue' do not have the faint undertones of turpentine that many other varieties have. 'Arp' is believed to be the hardiest variety.

Tip: Prune off a few stems weekly to encourage tender new leaves, which have the best flavor.

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)

The large salvia family includes a wide range of plants, many bearing clusters of red or purple flowers. This species is best for use in the kitchen. It is a perennial that can survive moderate winter temperatures.

Best varieties: 'Berggarten' has the reputation as the most flavorful. The tubular red flowers on 'Pineapple' sage attract hummingbirds.

Tip: For best flavor, harvest and dry sage leaves before the plants flower.

Tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*)

This perennial has a sweet but delicate licorice-like flavor that pairs well with chicken, fish, and egg dishes.

Best varieties: French tarragon, which can be grown only from divisions or cuttings (not seeds), has the best flavor.

Tip: Cut back brown foliage in spring and divide the plant every third year to renew it.

Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)

Thyme might be the most cold-tolerant herb, coming back every year even after harsh winters.

Best varieties: Lemon thyme has a citrusy flavor and fragrance that makes it good choice for making tea. Look for variegated varieties such as 'Autreus' or 'Silver Queen' to use as edging for flower beds. 'Argenteus' stays compact, so it's a good choice for containers.

Tip: Prostrate forms of thyme makes a dense (and fragrant) ground cover that can replace lawn grasses in spots with a limited amount of foot traffic.





AIR DRYING

You can preserve your homegrown herbs for months after you've harvested them and use them when you don't have fresh cuttings. All you need to do is dry them first.

Here's how:

1. **Choose** a well-ventilated, dry place in your home. An attic or closet will work.
2. **Cut herbs** such as lavender, oregano, and thyme, in small bunches (about five or six stems). Bind the stems together with rubber bands or twist-ties.
3. **Put each bunch** into a lunch-size paper bag and tie it closed with twine.
4. **Hang the bags** so the herbs are upside down. Attaching the bags to clothes hangers with clothespins can make this easier to do.
5. **Wait two weeks** and then check to see if the leaves have turned brittle. When they do, rub them off the stems into a large bowl.
6. **Store** the dried leaves in jars away from direct light.

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