
A BOUNTIFUL CULINARY HERB GARDEN

BY DAVID GILSON

"An Herb Garden, just what I've always wanted." Herbs are pictured in almost every garden magazine, are in every garden center, garnish menus by the best chefs, and are considered an important part of a healthy diet. Where to begin?

Creating an herb garden. Which herbs are appropriate for our area? Which are the most popular? How to choose a design? Should I have a consultant come in? These kinds of questions usually prevent us from realizing the joy of an herb garden.

In the Boston area, May is definitely the time to plant. However, it can also offer a wide range of planting conditions: strong winds, freezing temps, rain and snow or, drought conditions and high temps. We therefore need to phase in our plants to give them their greatest chance of surviving and flourishing.

Where should I plant my herb garden?

The garden should be close to the house. You'll use them more if they are nearby, closer to your kitchen or outdoor cooking area where it is handy to pick a few sprigs. Find the sunniest place as most herbs are from the Mediterranean and want to grow in full sun with gentle breezes. Since herbs want a full day of sun, be aware of shade and shadows that will be caused when trees leaf and the sun moves behind buildings.

What needs to be done before planting? Soil preparation can mean the difference between prolific, leafy, flowering plants, or plants that are inexplicably dying. In our area, many of our soils contain heavy clay or rocks, both limiting the depth of roots. Roots want to reach deep, 10 – 12 inches, in a well-drained soil that has enough organic material to feed and water the developing roots. As a general rule, I find equal parts of compost, loam, and gravel (coarse sand with varying sizes of small rocks) promotes the best plants. To evaluate your soil, dig down approximately one foot in random areas throughout your proposed planting area and observe if there are different layers. Whichever components (compost – or-

ganic material, gravel or loam) are missing, then you will need to blend these into the soil. If the majority of your soil is clay, or if ledge or large rocks are present, then building raised beds may be your best option.

Planting the herb garden - If this is your first culinary garden, start with a small area, perhaps a bed two feet wide by ten feet in length and buy one or two plants of each kind of culinary herb. This will provide all that you can use and then some. Plant all the perennials together; annuals next, and have those plants that you will bring inside for the winter in pots.



When can I plant?

Once your plants are acclimated to the outdoors and the soil has been prepared, you may plant the hardiest of the perennial plants in early May. Perennials (those plants that live year round outdoors) which may be planted are: *Mint*, both Spearmint and Peppermint; *Thyme*, both Silver and Common; *Sage*, Berggarten and Dwarf; *Oregano*, True and Greek; *Tarragon*; *Chives*,

Garden and Garlic; and *Lavender*, Munstead, Hidcote, and English.

Tender perennials (live year-round if brought in before frost) and Annuals (live one year) should be planted late in May. Tender perennials which may be planted, after threat of frost are: *Rosemary*, Upright and Creeping; *Lavender*, Sweet and Goodwins Creek; *Sage*, Gold, Tri-color and Purple. Annuals which may be planted in late May (after threat of frost) are *Dill*, *Cilantro*, *Roquette* (Arugula) and *Chervil*. *Basil*, everyone's favorite, is a very tender annual and should be planted in June.

Hardening off plants. If your herb plants have lived indoors, either in a greenhouse or your house, there are steps to acclimate the plant to its new home. Two weeks prior to planting: place the pots of herbs outside on days above 40°; be sure the herbs are protected from the wind; and leave the plants out overnight as long as the temperature is above freezing – if the temperature dips below freezing be sure the plants

are in a protected area, like an unheated porch. Once planted be prepared to protect your herbs from late season snow. Be prepared as well, to water every four to five days if no rain falls. When purchasing plants, be sure to ask if they have been hardened off.

Where should I buy my plants? Most garden centers stock a basic assortment of annual and hardy perennial herbs in the spring. The big difference between shopping at one place or another should have to do with variety, reliability and service, not price. Nurseries that specialize in herbs offer a much wider selection, have more interesting and unusual varieties and sell from spring through fall. You'll find plants with outstanding flavor and fragrance, and get advice tailored to your climate and growing conditions.

How to choose an herb plant. When choosing a plant look for one that's bushy and full, with lots of fresh-looking foliage. Avoid skinny bare-stemmed plants whose bottom leaves have fallen off. Also, rub a leaf and sniff it! Herbs are fragrant and have distinctive aromas with the greatest concentration of oils under their leaves. If it doesn't have a distinct, appetizing aroma at all or doesn't smell right - don't buy it.

How many plants should I buy? It's best to try two or three plants of each variety. Cluster planting offers a better visual appearance to your garden. If you know you will use a large quantity of a certain variety (i.e. Basil), plant several to insure a bountiful crop. Also plant annuals sequentially (every two to three weeks) to insure availability over a longer season.

Perennials

Chives - Chives sprout in early spring and bare heads of pretty mauve flowers a month or so later. The chive is the smallest member of the onion family and is sometimes called the "onion chive". The flowers can be eaten and make a beautiful addition to a salad.

Lavender - Lavender is one of those very distinguishable herbs that most know and love for its aromatic quality and lovely spiked purple flowers. While we do not think of it as a culinary herb, there are many wonderful applications in the kitchen.

Mint - Both peppermint and spearmint make fragrant, refreshing teas and are delightful additions to fresh fruit and many ethnic recipes. Both plants spread fast and can be very invasive. Consider planting in containers or in its own designated area.

Oregano - Greek oregano (the most common) has white flowers and excellent flavor.

Tarragon - French tarragon forms a patch of slender stems with anise-scented foliage you can pick from spring through fall.

Thyme - Common thyme forms a bushy mound of wiry stems

with tiny leaves. Other species of thyme are good so compare aromas as you shop and choose your favorite(s). Thymes are very often categorized into three groupings: upright (12-18"), bushy (6-12"), and creeping (1-6") based on their growing habit.

Sage - Sage leaves are good fresh or dried, as seasoning or in tea. The plant is semi-shrubby and semi-evergreen, with lovely blue flowers in late spring.

Tender Perennial

Rosemary - Rosemary is an evergreen herb with aromatic, pine needle-shaped leaves and whorls of blue flowers. The creeping rosemary usually stays low to the ground and is perfect for trailing over walls and window boxes. The upright rosemary makes an excellent topiary. Plant rosemary in pots that you can bring in at the end of the season; this will help brunt transplant shock and insure a vital plant for your indoor herb garden.

Annuals

Basil - Strongly scented green leaves and white/pink flowers, this herb is probably most associated with Italian cooking. The spicy, vibrant flavor is captivating. All varieties of basil belong to the mint family. It's a tender heat-loving annual that grows two to three feet tall. When the plant matures it sends out flower spikes, which carry rows of tiny white/pink flowers. If you are like most cooks, you'll need to plant at least six sweet basil plants. Utilize the flowers in the same way as other short-lived plants (cilantro, dill, arugula).

Cilantro - A very distinctive taste - some say that it needs to be acquired. The lower leaves are fan-like and look very similar to Italian flat-leaf parsley. The lower leaves are lacy and feathery. This herb has delicate, pinkish white flowers, which appear in umbrella-shaped clusters. During the long days (June - August) the plant will go to flower in about 3-4 weeks. Plant in succession every 3-4 weeks so that you can continually crop leaves. However use the flowers as they have the same taste with the sweet nectar of the flowers. Cilantro is the same plant as Coriander and Chinese Parsley.

Dill - Dill will reach a height of 2-4 feet and has lacy blue-green foliage with large umbels of brown, oval-shaped seeds. It is very attractive to bees. Dill makes excellent vinegar, is the main flavoring in dill pickles and is delightful in fish recipes. □

David Gilson is the founder and owner of The Herb Lyceum at Gilson's in Groton, MA. The Lyceum hosts education programs and herbal dinners. Surrounded by herb gardens, fruit trees, and several greenhouses, they grow 300 varieties of herb plants. David and his plants can be found at several of the area's farmers' markets.

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