



# herbs



## what are they?

A herb is a plant whose leaves (and sometimes stems) are valued for flavouring, food, fragrance or medicinal qualities. With spices, a part other than the leaf is used – root, stem, bark, seed or flower. Spices are generally more potent than herbs, so less is needed when cooking.

Herbs, both wild and cultivated, have been used around the world for tens of thousands of years. In France, the Lascaux caves contain drawings of herbs that have been carbon dated to around 20,000 BCE. In the 5th century BCE, Hippocrates catalogued 400 herbs commonly in use. Herb schools existed in Egypt 5000 years ago; herbs in Chinese and Indian medicines date back at least 3000 years; and there are several herb references in the Bible.

Herb gardens in Medieval Europe were often in a grid format, close to the medic's residence and infirmary. Ironically, these same herbs and spices were commonly used to disguise the flavour of putrid foodstuffs, which regularly passed their 'best by' date without the benefits of refrigeration. Unfortunately, around this time, herbalists ran the risk of being burnt by the Church as witches and pagans, which was a bit of a drawback.

In some cultures, distinctive herbs have become a signature part of the cuisine (think Italy). In the modern world, herbs are one of the fastest growing horticultural industries due to increasing interest in diet and natural products. The disadvantage of this rise in popularity is that herbs are sometimes intensively farmed in non-organic monocultures, highly processed (think gelatin-encased capsules) and, in the case of the supplement industry, divert money to corporations and away from small, local businesses. Buying plastic bottles of processed herbs off-the-shelf doesn't come close in terms of taste, sustainability, health & community benefits to growing or collecting herbs from nature.



*Drying herbs.*



*A well-laid-out herb garden.*

## what are the benefits?

Herbs are a health-giving, low-calorie way of creating a twist, theme or accent in your meal, and improving flavour, aroma, texture and colour. Particularly when used fresh / raw, they can provide many vitamins, trace minerals, good oils and antioxidants in your diet, and many have anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial properties. As with most foods, the fresher and less-processed herbs are, the better they are for you. The health-conscious often add herbs to green smoothies.

If you grow your own, the benefits are increased. The satisfaction of growing something to eat can be immense. Your home-grown plants will provide you with cheaper, fresher, organic produce with zero food miles. In the summer, aromatic fragrances on the breeze are blissful, maybe conjuring up nostalgic memories of summer holidays. By weight, herbs can be expensive, so if you use herbs a lot, you can save yourself quite a bit of money by growing your own.

Plants and flowers (beautiful purple chive heads) can be colourful and serve as wonderful forage for bees. You can also forage yourself for wild herbs. The most obvious example of this is ramsons (wild garlic), wonderfully prolific in early spring when there's little else around. Garlic mustard / Jack-by-the-hedge is also popular.

## what can I do?

Growing your own herbs is easy, and they come in all sizes - small plants for pots and window boxes (basil, chives, parsley etc.), shrubs (e.g. rosemary – with its pretty blue flowers) and trees (bay – which also has the advantage of being evergreen). Nearly all herbs can be grown from seed but if you're a beginner, be kind to yourself; rather than starting from seed, begin by buying a plant from a shop or garden centre and tending to its needs. Although mint is possibly the easiest plant to grow, basil is an excellent plant for training you in herb care because it's a 'mineshaft'

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canary', drooping the minute it doesn't have enough water, but reviving as soon as you give it a drink. Basil, like many herbs, benefits from a little water each day rather than a deluge once a week, and so will quickly get you focused on plant care – essential if you are going to be growing your herbs in pots. Remember, basil is a delicate plant and will certainly die outside in the winter.

When taking basil, use scissors to cut just above a pair of leaves. You can also chop up the stem and use it, but importantly, the small leaves left behind will be encouraged to grow and bush out the plant. If you don't do this, your herb plant will grow tall and spindly with lots of stem and few leaves – precisely what the home chef doesn't want.

When selecting any herb to grow, rub the leaf gently between thumb and forefinger and smell. Not all varieties will be right for you, e.g. if you want tarragon for cooking, you need the French variety prized for its sweet liquorice flavour, not the more bitter Russian ('false tarragon') variety. And there are many different mint types, some like 'Pineapple Mint' are very exotic-sounding (and this one is especially pretty as it's variegated). In fact mint is easy to grow from a cutting so if you have a friend with one you like, ask for about 3 stems, remove the lower leaves, put it in water and after a week or two, they'll start growing little white roots from a node (where the leaf joins the stem) and you'll be able to plant it out. Don't be afraid to ask friends for cuttings or a small amount of root, because herbs, if they like where they're planted, will grow rapidly. Oregano and mint are especially spreading and lots of gardeners grow them in pots in the ground to stop them getting out of hand.



An interesting way of growing herbs indoors or outdoors – in tin cans fixed to the wall.

A good idea for growing herbs is a 'herb spiral'. Build a spiral of whatever material you have to hand - stone, slate, bricks etc. - and fill it with soil. You can grow a range of different herbs in a small space because a) you're growing vertically; b) herbs that prefer full sun can be on one side, herbs that don't can be on the other; and c) the top will be drier than the bottom, so moisture-loving plants can be at the bottom.

Research recipes and be conscious when eating, noticing the properties it brings to the meal. The right time to add the herb to the dish will vary; dried and more robust herbs (e.g. thyme) usually go in early in the cooking process, to give time for flavours to infuse. Fresh, delicate leaves (basil, marjoram) should be stirred in towards the end, and they will keep their distinctive essence. Sometimes bundles of herbs are tied together and simmered with a stock, stew or casserole and taken out before serving. This bundle is called a *bouquet garni* and traditionally included bay, thyme and parsley, sometimes wrapped or tied to a piece of leek or celery.

If you want to preserve herbs by drying, perhaps for teas, you'll find some herbs easier to work with than others. As a rule, woody types (rosemary, sage) dry more easily than more succulent ones (basil, marjoram). Over time, your preserved herb will lose its colour, flavour and medicinal benefits, so it's best to regularly use up and replace. You can also preserve using oil, either in a concentrate form like a pesto, or an oil infusion with the leaf removed after about a month, to prevent it going mildewy. Usually olive oil is the most stable oil to use as it has the lowest water content, so it's less likely to go rancid. You could have a go at preserving in vinegar (e.g. chive flower vinegar), honey (e.g. sage honey, to relieve a sore throat) or even vodka, as a tincture or tonic.

## resources

- see [lowimpact.org/herbs](http://lowimpact.org/herbs) for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Graham Clarke, *the Organic Herb Gardener*
- Sarah Baker, *Herbaceous*
- Miranda Smith, *Your Backyard Herb Garden*
- [herbsociety.org.uk](http://herbsociety.org.uk) - the Herb Society
- [hobbyfarms.com/herb-basics-growing-herbs-4](http://hobbyfarms.com/herb-basics-growing-herbs-4) - herb basics: growing herbs
- [gardenherbs.org](http://gardenherbs.org) - good beginners resource
- [culinaryherbguide.com](http://culinaryherbguide.com) - good overview

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