

Growing Culinary Herbs

Review the presentation and learn more:
<http://go.ncsu.edu/herb-resources>

Culinary herbs are plants used to flavor foods and beverages. Typically leaves are harvested and used fresh or dried. Different types of plants are used as culinary herbs, including:

- **Annuals**—These plants live only one season and must be replanted each year
- **Perennials**—These are non woody plants that live for many years. Many perennials go dormant in the winter but return in the spring from the same root system.
- **Shrubs**—Plants with woody stems that live for many years

Culinary herbs are among the easiest edible plants you can grow at home. Most herbs naturally have few pest problems – even the deer tend to leave them alone. All that most herbs need to thrive is a spot that receives 6+ hours of sun each day and well-drained soil.

If you have heavy clay, grow herbs in raised beds that have been filled with a blend of soil and compost. Another option is to grow herbs in containers filled with potting soil on a patio or deck.

Growing in Containers

Containers for growing herbs should be at least 8" deep and have drainage holes in the bottom. Fill containers with potting soil but take care not to over water or over fertilize them. Most herbs grow best and develop more intense flavor when grown under moderately dry conditions and low to moderate nutrient levels.

While multiple herbs can be potted together in larger containers best results typically come from potting each plant individually in its own container. Clay pots work well for herbs because they dry out quicker between waterings.

Raised beds filled with a mix of soil and compost are an ideal place to grow herbs. Beds should be at least 8" deep and no more than 4' wide (you should be able to reach into the middle of the bed from the side without stepping into it).

Harvesting Tips

Herbs are at their most flavorful just before their blossoms open. Cutting the flowers off the plant can prolong harvest. The flowers of herbs are edible and taste similar to the leaves. Many herb flowers are very attractive to pollinators and beneficial insects.

Herbs harvested in early morning, just after the dew dries, will have the longest shelf life. Herbs can be stored in a container in the refrigerator for fresh use for several days. They can be preserved for later use by freezing them in water in ice trays or by drying them in a warm, well ventilated location out of direct sunlight. Drying can be quickened with the use of a dehydrator, oven or microwave. Herbs with soft, tender leaves such as basil are more difficult to dry.

Types of Herbs

To grow any herb successfully, you will need to know what type of plant it is (annual or perennial) and what conditions it prefers. Annual herbs can be:

- **Cool season**—tolerant of frost; Grow best in fall and spring. Plant these in late summer (Aug/ Sept) and early spring (March).
- **Warm season**—frost sensitive; Grow best in summer. Plant in spring after the threat of frost has passed (typically after mid April).

Following are tips for growing popular culinary herbs in central North Carolina:

Annual Herbs

- **Basil** is the most popular annual herb for summer and is easily grown from seed. Plant a new batch every three to four weeks for an endless

supply of basil leaves until frost. Bees love basil flowers – allow older plants to bloom to attract bees to your garden that will help pollinate summer vegetables.

- **Cuban oregano** and **Stevia** are other popular warm season herbs.
- **Parsley, dill and cilantro** do not grow well during the heat of summer. Plant these cool season herbs in August for a fall crop and again in March for a spring crop. Parsley often survives the winter outdoors.
- Caraway, chervil and cumin are less commonly grown cool season herbs. They can be grown from seed, similar to parsley and cilantro.

Perennial Herbs

- **Thyme, oregano, sage, lavender and sweet marjoram** need excellent drainage and sun to thrive.
- **Rosemary** and **Bay** are evergreen, drought tolerant, shrubs that grow three to four feet tall and wide. Bay can grow as tall as 10'. One plant will provide most cooks with all they need.
- **Chives** and **garlic chives** grow from small bulbs. Both their leaves and flowers are edible. If the flowers are left to set seed, both plants will self-sow in the garden.
- **Mints**, such as peppermint and spearmint, tolerate more shade than other herbs but are vigorous spreaders and can quickly colonize an entire garden. Keep these plants in containers or plant them in an isolated location where they will not get out of control.
- **French tarragon** struggles in hot and humid summers. Afternoon shade and additional watering will help it survive. Russian tarragon is more heat tolerant but inferior in flavor.

Mexican Mint Marigold (aka Mexican tarragon) is a heat tolerant perennial marigold that tastes similar to tarragon.

- Other perennial herbs include lemon balm (very easy to grow), salad burnet (with cucumber flavored leaves), and horseradish, which needs rich moist soil to thrive.
- **Culinary ginger, lemon verbena** and **lemongrass** are perennials but are not winter hardy in our climate. Ginger rhizomes can be planted outside in spring and harvested in fall before frost. Grow lemongrass and lemon verbena in beds or containers for the summer but bring them indoors for the winter.

Learn more! Visit:

<http://go.ncsu.edu/herb-resources>
to review the presentation and find links to many wonderful online resources!

**For help with your garden,
Contact Chatham County Extension Master
Gardener Volunteers**—available Mon. and
Wed. 1:00-4:00pm, Fri. 9:00am -12:00pm

- Visit us at the Chatham County Agriculture and Conference Center, 1192 US 64W Business, Pittsboro
- Call 919-545-2715
- Email: chathamemgv@gmail.com

Visit Chatham County Cooperative Extension online:

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- Find postings of recent gardening news and announcements, and learn about upcoming events

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Tips for Drying Herbs and Cooking with Herbs

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Chatham County Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

- Fresh herbs are generally best for cooking, but one of the exceptions is **oregano**; there is better flavor from dried. If you find oregano too strong, use marjoram instead.
- **If using dried herbs** instead of fresh, use half of the amount called for in the recipe.
- **If doubling recipe**, do not double herbs- try 1 ½ times the amount.
- **Add dried herbs** at the beginning of cooking and fresh near the end of cooking.
- **Most herbs dry nicely** in a dehydrator with a thermostat and a fan at 95-125 degrees, depending on the humidity. Some dry in an hour while others take much longer. A few exceptions are **dill** seed-dry heads in a brown paper bag in the dark, **garlic** - spread out on racks to dry, **lavender** and **rosemary** - tied in bunches and hung to dry. Make sure dill seed heads, rosemary and lavender picked when dew has burned off. Check occasionally for mold.
- **Pick herbs in the morning** before heat of the day. Rinse in cold water to remove bugs, dirt, and debris.
- **Place in salad spinner** and remove as much excess water as possible. Lay leaves on trays (with space between leaves) of dehydrator for herbs such as basil, lemon verbena, sage, lemon grass, lemon balm. Lay sprigs sparingly of herbs such as fennel, dill, oregano, thyme, marjoram and then remove stems when dried and ready to store.
- Use clean jars with tight lids. Mason jars are a good choice. **Crush herbs when you are using them**, not when packing in jars for storage (keeps oils and scent from being released until needed).
- Many years ago a speaker at a meeting for Herb Society of Wake said that she used **virgin olive oil** much more often than extra virgin olive oil. The reason being that the wonderful flavors of the herbs could be covered up by the bold flavor of the extra virgin olive oil.
- If you find **pesto** to be too strong for your taste, try using ½ flat leaf parsley and ½ basil for your recipe.
- **Infused oils** will become rancid, so if adding herbs to oils, use within a few weeks.
- **Infused vinegars will last a long time.** Place herbs in vinegar - mason jars are good because of wide mouth for adding herbs. Place in a **dark cupboard** for six weeks. Strain vinegar and place in glass container.