

Defining an Herb

A dictionary defines an herb as *a plant or plant part valued for its medicinal, savory, or aromatic qualities*. Another definition is simply *an herb is a useful plant*.

However you define an herb, once you have experienced the pleasure of growing herbs and learning about all the endless uses of the plants, you will never want to garden without them.

Landscaping with Herbs

Herbs are often planted in traditional herb gardens, separate from the rest of the landscape. Focusing on a particular herbal use (such as medicinal, aromatic or culinary) creates herb theme gardens. Many gardeners like to locate their herb gardens near the back door where they are conveniently located for cutting and using in the kitchen.

Today it is becoming more popular to use herbs as an addition to your existing flower or vegetable garden. Their ornamental value makes them useful in a mixed border or as a specimen plant.

Growing herbs in containers is a wonderful way for people who live in apartments, or have small gardening spaces, to enjoy these special plants. Large containers work best, as they retain moisture well and allow room for growth. Try combining groups of herbs together to make an attractive planting that can be placed close to a kitchen door for easy access.

Harvesting and Preserving Herbs

For the best flavor, use fresh herbs when possible. Harvest them early in the morning, after the dew has dried but before the hot sun causes the volatile oils, that give herbs their flavor, to dissipate. Choose the young, new growth cutting back up to 1/3 of the stem. Wash the herbs well, pat dry and use as soon as possible.

Many herbs can be kept up to a week or more by placing them between two damp paper towels in a plastic bag and storing them in the refrigerator. Herbs with long stems can be kept in the refrigerator for a few days in a vase of cool water covered with plastic wrap. **Warning:** Do not put fresh basil in the refrigerator — it will turn black! Basil is best stored in a vase of cool water on the counter or windowsill.

Another method of storing fresh herbs is in the freezer. Chop clean, dry herbs into small pieces with a scissors or knife, flash freeze them on a cookie sheet lined with waxed paper and then transfer them to a freezer bag or container.

Chopped herbs can also be put into ice cube trays, adding just enough water to cover. When frozen, transfer herbed ice cubes to freezer bags, adding later to soups and stews.

Air drying often preserves herbs. Tie together small bundles of fresh herbs and hang upside down in a well ventilated area until dried and easily crushed. Transfer to an airtight container until needed.

Cooking with Herbs

Cooking is a creative process and seasoning is mostly a matter of personal taste. Here are some general guidelines to use for incorporating herbs into your meals.

- Dried herbs have more concentrated volatile oil than freshly picked herbs. If a recipe calls for dried herbs, but you would like to use fresh herbs, the rule of thumb is to use about twice the amount of fresh as dried. Rub the fresh herb leaves between your hands and then mince them using kitchen scissors or a sharp knife.
- For best flavor in long-cooking foods like soups and stews, add fresh herbs during the last 20 minutes of cooking.

See the *Herb Cooking Companion Chart* on page 4 for suggestions about which herbs go best with which foods.

Using Herbs for Health

Recent trends towards health foods and healthy lifestyles have brought more attention to the medicinal use of herbs. Herbs have traditionally been used as healing ingredients in teas, decoctions, tinctures, compresses, poultices and ointments. Caution must be exercised when using herbs medicinally as it is difficult to be certain of dosage and potency.

The list of uses for herbs is almost endless: scented bath bags, lotions, cosmetics, potpourri, herbal wreaths, infused oils and vinegars, teas, jellies and herbal liqueur. You can always find a use for that versatile plant in the garden called an herb!

Suggested Herbs for Kansas Gardens

Plant Name	Description and Culture	History and Use
Basil <i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual • 1 – 2' tall • Transplant in spring after danger of frost is past • Full sun 	<p>In Italy, basil is considered the herb of love. Most popularly known as the key ingredient in pesto, it is a great companion to any tomato dish. A member of the mint family, it imparts a spicy, peppery flavor to foods.</p>
Bay <i>Laurus nobilis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tender perennial • Evergreen tree grows up to 5' tall in pots • Start new plants from cuttings • Full sun to part shade 	<p>Used to season stews, soups and tomato sauces. Adds flavor to shellfish boils. Remember to remove the leaf before serving the dish, as bay leaves have very sharp edges.</p>
Chives <i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • 12" tall • Lavender blooms in spring • Full sun to part shade 	<p>Flowers and foliage lend a light onion flavor to salads, soups, stews, omelets and baked potatoes. Break flower into individual florets.</p>
Coriander <i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual • 2 to 3' tall • Sow from seed—does not transplant well except in cool, moist weather • Full sun to part shade 	<p>The name coriander is usually applied to the seed of the plant and cilantro to the leaves. Coriander was prized as an ingredient in Roman vinegar used to preserve meat. Cilantro is an essential ingredient in Southwest, Mexican and Thai cooking.</p>
Dill <i>Anethum graveolens</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual • Up to 3' tall • Sow seed in spring • Full sun 	<p>Dill seed is commonly used as a pickling spice. Dill leaves are used to flavor fish sauce and salad dressings. Ancient herbalists used the seed to dispel flatulence.</p>
Fennel <i>Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual • Up to 4' tall—sow seed in spring, • Reseeds readily • Full sun 	<p>Fennel tea is said to soothe the stomach. Fennel has a mild anise flavor. Use the leaves as a garnish and in green salads. Combines well with fish, sausage, eggs and cheese.</p>
Lavender <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • 1½' tall by 2' wide • Light, well drained soil • Propagate by cuttings in spring or by division • Full sun 	<p>The name lavender derives from the Latin verb "to wash." Both the Romans and Greeks used this herb to scent their soap and bath water. Largely used today in the perfume industry.</p>
Lemon Balm <i>Melissa officinalis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • 2' tall and wide • Propagate by cuttings, layering or divisions • Full sun to part shade 	<p>Lemon balm was used as a mild relaxant in past centuries. Lightly lemon flavored with a hint of mint, it blends well in fresh green salads and in fruit salads. Dried, it makes a mild, tasty lemon flavored tea.</p>

Plant Name	Description and Culture	History and Use
Mint <i>Mentha spp.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • Up to 2' tall • Propagate by cuttings, layering or divisions • Full sun to part shade 	Because of its refreshing scent, mint was used in ancient times as a strewing herb in kitchens and sickrooms. Mint tea is used today to treat an upset stomach. There are many flavors of mints. Try adding a sprig to a glass of lemonade or ice tea.
Oregano <i>Origanum vulgare</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • 1 – 2' tall • Propagate by cuttings in summer or division in spring • Full sun 	The Greeks made poultices from the leaves, using them on sores and aching muscles. Oregano has a hot, peppery flavor best known for use in all types of tomato dishes.
Parsley <i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biennial • 1½' tall • Sow seed or transplant when soil temperature reaches 50 degrees F • Full sun to part shade 	Italian or flat leaf parsley is the best selection for culinary use. The mild, fresh flavor works especially well at blending the flavors around it. It is high in chlorophyll, and acts as a natural breath freshener.
Rosemary <i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tender perennial • Up to 5' tall in ideal climates • Propagate by cuttings, layering or divisions • Full sun to part shade 	In ancient Greece, rosemary was thought to improve one's memory; students wore garlands of rosemary when studying for exams. Rosemary has a strong, pungent taste and should be added in moderation so as not to overpower the other flavors in foods.
Sage <i>Salvia officinalis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • Propagate by cuttings, layering, divisions or seed • Full sun to light shade 	In ancient times, sage was associated with longevity and increased mental capacity. Use as a flavoring for soups and salads, or in combinations with pork and fish dishes.
Savory <i>Satureja spp.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • Up to 2' tall • Propagate by cuttings or divisions in spring • Full sun to part shade 	Both the annual summer savory and the woody perennial savory are used as culinary herbs. Summer savory has a light peppery taste that goes especially well with green beans. Winter savory is stronger and blends well with meats.
Tarragon <i>Artemisia dracunculul</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • Up to 2' tall • Propagate by cuttings or divisions in spring • Full sun to part shade 	Tarragon is a prized culinary herb. It is a key ingredient in béarnaise sauce. It makes flavorful vinegar that can be used in salad dressings and marinades. Chewing on a leaf of tarragon will produce a slight numbing feeling on the tongue.
Thyme <i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perennial • Up to 1' tall • Propagate by cuttings, layering or divisions • Full sun to part shade 	Greeks used thyme to flavor liqueurs and cheeses. Its taste is lightly herbal with a faint hint of clove. There are flavored varieties such as lemon thyme and oregano thyme. A key ingredient in French fines herbs.

Herb Cooking Companion Chart

● Flavor blends well ▲ Flavor blends very well

	Basil	Bay Leaf	Chives	Coriander	Dill	Fennel	Lemon	Mint	Oregano	Parsley	Rosemary	Sage	Savory	Tarragon	Thyme
Meat															
Fish	●	●	●		●	●			●	●	●	●	●	●▲	●
Beef	●	●				●			●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Pork	●	●			●				●	●	●	●▲	●	●	●
Poultry	●	●	●		●				●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lamb	●	●		●	●		●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
Vegetables															
Asparagus			●				●					●	●	●	●
Beans	●				●							●	●▲		●
Broccoli	●				●		●		●					●	●
Cabbage	●		●		●	●							●		●
Carrots	●		●		●▲			●		●		●	●	●	●
Onions					●	●			●	●	●	●	●		●
Potatoes			●		●▲	●			●	●	●	●		●	●
Spinach	●		●		▲						●		●		●
Tomatoes	●▲		●						●	●	●		●		●
Salad Dressings															
Mayonnaise	●		●		●						●		●	●	
Vinegar	●		●		●				●		●	●	●	●	●
Misc.															
Eggs	●		●▲	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Rice	●					●				●				●	●
Breads			●		●	●			●		●	●			●
Fruit							●	●			●			●	

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