

How to be a Winter Herb Superstar

by Kate O'Lenic



Fresh herbs can't be beat for brightening up a dish. There are several that are very easy to grow indoors to give your dishes that special lift all winter. Some of the best and most popular ones to grow indoors include basil, chives, parsley, thyme, and mint. Plants can be grown from seed, or purchased as seedlings if, like me, you want to jump start the herbs and not wait for germination. Organic seeds or seedlings are the best choices to avoid unwanted chemical additives. And, dwarf or compact varieties are better for space considerations. Here are some examples of compact plants for indoor gardening.

Plant	Scientific Name	Comment
"Grolau" Chives	<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	8-12" tall
"Fernleaf" Dill	<i>Anethum graveolens</i>	18" tall
"Spicy Globe" basil	<i>Ocimum basilicum minimum</i>	8-10" tall, recommended grown from seed
Broadleaf thyme	<i>Plectranthus amboinicus</i> or <i>Coleus amboinicus</i>	10-12" tall AKA Spanish thyme or Cuban oregano
"English" mint	<i>Mentha spicata</i>	spearmint

What size container? The best size for a pot is 6 inches in diameter. It has enough room to support most herbs, gives the roots enough room to spread, and it can hold enough soil for the plant's nutritional needs. As with any plant pot, be sure it has drainage holes to prevent waterlogging the plant and causing root rot. Also, if repurposing a container, make sure it is clean and never held anything toxic to plants or people, like pesticides or herbicides.

Here's the inside scoop on dirt (actually, soil). There are a few options for mixtures. It needs to be well-draining and not too rich. Herbs are light eaters when it comes to fertilizer. Packaged potting soil is the simplest way to go. Another option is to combine two parts soilless potting mix with 1 part perlite. One more mixture to consider is equal parts of these three items: compost, perlite and vermiculite. Avoid using soil from the garden, especially if you have clay soil. The

negative aspects of clay (denseness, excess water retention, poor aeration) can be worse if used in a small pot. And garden soil may contain pests or disease from the summer's garden.

Let there be light! Adequate light is critical to grow strong plants. Too little light will produce leggy, sparse plants. Herbs need 6 hours of direct sunlight. A sunny, west or south-facing window is best. However, it is likely that additional light will be needed during the winter. You can get all fancy and buy special indoor growing kits with "grow lights", but you don't need to. Another option is providing 12 to 14 hours a day of fluorescent or LED light 6-12 inches above the plants. A timer on the light will help ensure the right amount of light is provided. Hang the lights on chains so they can be raised as the plants grow to maintain proper spacing between plants and the light source. It's also a good idea to rotate plants every 2 weeks to ensure all sides get enough light.



Keep the plants comfy. For best results, place them in a room where the temperature stays between 60-70 degrees. It's important to avoid direct drafts from heating vents. Those drafts can dry the plants out. Not to mention that the air in the house tends to be dry during winter. To provide humidity to keep plants from drying out, use a small tray of water with pebbles in the bottom that the pots can sit on. Keep the plants out of the water to avoid root rot. You could also lightly mist the plants for added moisture.

Be kind with the water. When watering the pots, room temperature water is best. Water as appropriate for the herb. For example, chives prefer to stay moist; sage and thyme need to dry slightly between waterings. Check the soil often to determine if water is needed.

A gentle breeze is appreciated. Have a fan in the area to keep the air moving. The air movement will help prevent mildew. And, as with heating vents, avoid strong air flow directly on the plants.

Feed them a light meal. Fertilize approximately every 2 weeks using $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ the normally recommended amount. Herbs do best with less. Too much of a good thing decreases aroma and flavor.

If insects make pests of themselves with your herbs, mix 1 to 2 tablespoons of a mild soap such as dishwashing soap in one gallon of warm water. Spray the plants once a week when pests are visible. If the soap solution is discoloring or harming leaves, reduce the amount of soap used in

the solution. Stop using it if leaves continue to appear unusual. Always wash leaves off before using them for cooking or eating raw.

Take a little off the top, please. Keep herbs compact by trimming them often to prevent flowering, also known as bolting. Once flowers form, the flavor may be affected, and the plant will no longer produce new growth. In general, cut the stem just above a set of leaves rather than just harvesting the leaves. This will result in new growth. Parsley and cilantro should be harvested at the base of the plant.

So, there you have it. Fresh herbs all winter long and some tips on how to be a superstar growing them. Get ready - grow!

Resources for this article

“Grow herbs indoors for a winter school garden”,
https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/grow_herbs_indoors_for_a_winter_school_garden. Accessed 9/5/2022

“Vegetable Gardening in Containers”, Publication 426-336 (SPES-255P),
https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-336/SPES-255.pdf. Accessed 9/5/2022.

“Growing Herbs Indoors”, <https://union.ces.ncsu.edu/2021/10/growing-herbs-indoors/>. Accessed 9/5/2022.

“Growing Herbs Indoors”, <https://extension.psu.edu/growing-herbs-indoors>. Accessed 9/5/2022.

“Herbs All Winter: Grow Them Indoors”, <https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/2021-01-08-herbs-all-winter-grow-them-indoors>. Accessed 9/12/2022.

“Lighting for indoor plants and starting seeds”, <https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/lighting-indoor-plants>. Accessed 9/14/2022.

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