

Growing Culinary Herbs (published 2026-06-20)

By Joy Moore, Master Gardener

Whether it's adding fresh basil to spaghetti sauce or a sprig of mint to a pitcher of tea, fresh herbs can turn everyday meals into extraordinary fare. Herbs add interesting flavors and aromas to the foods we eat, and we are increasingly aware that using culinary herbs to enhance the flavor of foods can help us reduce salt and fat in our diets while also adding beneficial nutrients. Although fresh herbs are available at many stores, growing your own herbs can provide the cook with far fresher herbs than any you can buy.

Wanting a ready supply of fresh herbs for cooking is the reason most gardeners start growing these fascinating plants. Herbs belong in any garden, from formal knot gardens to vegetable plots to flower gardens. Herbs also make wonderful container plants for a sunny deck or balcony. In planning your herb garden, do remember that planting them close to your kitchen door will encourage you to enjoy your herbal bounty daily. Start small with 5-10 herbs and get to know them well. Some good choices are sage, thyme, oregano, chives, mint, rosemary, basil, parsley, and dill.

Most herbs are easy to grow in our area if a little attention is paid to their needs. Because many of our most popular herbs are native to the Mediterranean region, they prefer warm sunny conditions, well-drained soil, and good air circulation. Wait until all danger of frost has passed before planting annuals in the garden. For basil, wait until nighttime temperatures are above 50 degrees to plant outside. Perennials can be planted in spring or fall.

Begin by choosing a site that receives at least six hours of direct sunlight daily. The more sunlight the better the plants will thrive. The essential oils, which give herbs their strong flavors and fragrances, are greater when plants receive six to eight hours of sun each day. If you don't have a sunny location, many herbs will tolerate light shade, but their growth and quality may not be as good.

Good drainage is probably the most essential ingredient for a successful herb garden. Herbs will tolerate a variety of soils and conditions, but few tolerate poor drainage. Modify soils with organic matter like compost to improve soil texture and drainage. If no satisfactory site is available, construct raised beds. Or consider growing your herbs in containers, using a potting mix with enough larger particles (like perlite and/or bits of pine bark) to drain well. Do not use ordinary garden soil.

Good air circulation is essential for healthy plants in our area with our high humidity and periods of wet weather, so leave enough space between herbs to promote air movement. Most herbs need 1-2 feet between plants and a few need even more. Position plants far enough apart to allow for their mature size. Leaving ample room between plants allows leaves to dry out between rains and dews and helps prevent disease.

If properly sited, herbs are nearly carefree plants and need little maintenance. They seldom need watering, and many established perennial herbs are quite drought tolerant. Shallow-rooted, annual herbs such as dill and basil may require one inch or more of water per week, which is often supplied by rain. Herbs need little or no fertilizer; in fact, flavors are more intense if not over-fertilized. Compost is a good way to supply your herbs with adequate nourishment. Herbs have few disease and insect problems, so avoid using insecticides. You will be eating those leaves! If you use your herbs often, harvesting stems and leaves for culinary use provides most of the pruning your plants will need.

Container grown herbs require a bit more maintenance. Keep an eye on water, since herbs in pots dry

out faster than in the ground. A good soaking once or twice a week is usually adequate, but plants may require water once or twice a day during very hot weather. Since plants get little nourishment from the potting mix, add compost or worm castings at planting time, or feed with ½ strength liquid fertilizer twice a month or with a time-release fertilizer. Herbs in pots often need to be pinched back more often to keep them bushy and compact.

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<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County's YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

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