



BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Happy herb gardening!



Photo: Monicore/Pexels

Many herbs are happy in pots

Herbs can make a wonderful addition to any garden, patio, rockery or balcony.

They are quite easy to maintain and will grow happily in most areas, and several, such as rosemary, sage, thyme and lavender are even useful for coastal gardens.

Tips

Sow annual or biennial herbs such as parsley and coriander at intervals of three to four weeks to ensure a continuous supply of fresh leaves.

Don't fertilize herb plants too much or they will produce lots of lush growth, but with little flavour.

Pinch off tips every now and again to inspire the plant to grow bushier and to stop annual herbs, such as basil, from blooming; energy spent on seed production means less for leaf growth. Dead-head others as the flowers start to fade.

Pick herbs in the morning when the fragrant and flavourful oils are at their best and harvest the full plant just before they bloom, as it is then that they are at their most delicious. ■

Generally speaking, herbs prefer a sunny, sheltered location with neutral to alkaline soil and good drainage, though there are a few which thrive in shady conditions and moist soil, such as chervil, parsley, meadowsweet, mint, lemon balm and chives. As with everything, it's a case of checking out a plant's requirements and doing your best to replicate them.

Your reward for a little simple care of your herbs will be an almost constant supply of delicious leaves that can be nipped off as and when you need them, and perennials such as thyme, sage and rosemary can be harvested all year round.

Out in the garden

For your very own herb patch the first thing you need to do is prepare the ground. Your aim is to create a sandy, well-drained soil of moderate fertility. If you have heavy clay you can easily create a free-draining and fertile bed by digging a hole 35 to 45 centimetres deep and placing a five to ten centimetre layer of crushed stone or coarse sand on the bottom. Before returning the soil, dig through some organic

matter such as manure, compost and green waste, as well as a little coarse grit and/or sand. When you refill the beds lay the mix a bit higher than the original level to allow for settling.

If the soil is very acid, simply add a little lime.

Plan it out

If you take the time to make a plan, you will get to know your herbs better before you start and can have lots of fun positioning your plants. First of all make a list of herbs that you're most likely to use and include a description of their height and spread, foliage and/or flower colour, as well as their spacing, soil, light and water requirements. Then make a sketch of the shape of the bed, preferably to scale (for example, 2cm on the sketch equals 1m on the ground).

When deciding how to arrange your herbs, one of the first things you need to know is whether they are annual or biennial, such as basil, coriander, parsley, dill and chervil which grow quickly, or perennial like oregano, mint, thyme, sage, rosemary and chives, which are slower growing



Photo: Rawpixel/Pexels

Cooking with your own fresh herbs is a great feeling



Photo: Pixabay/Pexels

They even make wonderful tea!

and require a more permanent abode.

The two different types will probably have to be kept separate, as areas that hold annuals will need to be reworked more often.

Plants also need to be arranged according to height. Ideally, island beds (that can be accessed from all sides) shouldn't be any wider than 1.5m. The tallest herbs go in the centre, progressing to shorter ones around the outside. A border bed (reachable only from the front) shouldn't be much wider than 75cms. Place the tallest plants at the

back of the border and the lower ones in front of them. Care should be taken in planting coriander and continental parsley close together as both seed copiously and can become mixed up as they have similar leaves.

Plants can also be arranged to their best aesthetic advantage. For instance the silver-grey foliage of lavender or sage provides a wonderful background for bright flowers; herbs with colourful leaves can make any bed even more interesting; and low-growing plants such as chives and thyme can make a great path edge.

You could also arrange the plants to form a distinctive pattern or to highlight a special feature such as a fountain, garden seat or birdbath.

Also, bear in mind that herbs like mint spread very quickly and will need to be contained. Simply plant them in the ground in bottomless pots with the top of the pot level with, or just above, the soil surface.

Indoors and containers

The majority of herbs will also be quite happy in a nice pot or container. Relatively deep ones are best, especially for larger plants such as rosemary, and make sure that the container has effective drainage.

Thyme, lavender, and rosemary will all thrive in a pot in the garden or on a balcony, whilst chives, parsley, basil, coriander, marjoram, dill and mint will even grow well in a sunny spot indoors.

Cheap, useful and the perfect plants to start out with – why not give herbs a go? ■