Herbs from the Ground Up

To the inexperienced herb gardener, the incredible variety of tastes, scents and textures in the herb garden can be overwhelming—rather like attending a rowdy family reunion with many unfamiliar names and faces. But bit by bit, family relationships are sorted out, quirks and eccentricities are understood, and personalities are revealed. Since herbs are defined by their purpose--their usefulness to man--and not by their botanical classification, the task of learning how to grow them can seem quite daunting. Yet anyone can learn to have a "green thumb," even without being born with one! A basic understanding of good horticultural practices is essential. Learning about the life cycle of a particular herb and its place of origin will help the gardener select the right location and deliver the best care for each plant. Finding the common denominators for successful growing will simplify meeting the needs of a wide variety of herbs.

The "secrets" of happy herbs are simply no secret—just good gardening. Many herbs are quite adaptable to a range of growing conditions if sound horticultural practices are observed:

Sunlight: a generous ½ day of light, preferably morning light with some afternoon protection. No one knows "full sun" like a Texan. Many herbs will tolerate light shade; only a few thrive in deep shade.

Soil Preparation: Add organic matter (compost) and expanded clay shale to your beds—at least 2-3 inches of each, tilled in. This will improve the drainage and texture of clay soils, which will mean better root development, healthier plants and a greater availability of soil nutrients. Most herbs just don't like wet feet. Raised beds will also assist in drainage (and maintenance and harvesting for the gardener.)

Water: Give plants a thorough watering, not just a sprinkle, and back off to let the soil dry a bit. Don't water by the day of the week, or during the heat of the day. Group plants according to their water needs—many herbs prefer to stay on the dry side, once they're established. Avoid frequent wetting of the leaves from lawn sprinklers. Consider drip irrigation for efficient water use.

Fertilization: Easy does it. Your goal is a moderate rate of growth. You may prefer a water soluble organic formulation, a pelleted organic fertilizer, or synthetic time-release granules. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers which induce rapid, lanky growth that is more susceptible to insect and disease problems.

Mulch: Just do it. You will conserve water, cut down on weeds, regulate soil temperature, keep plants cleaner for harvesting, improve the appearance of your garden, and add to soil nutrients as the mulch decomposes. Some of the Mediterranean herbs (especially lavender) may benefit from a mulch of pea gravel, which reduces the humidity around the base of the plant and reflects light and heat into the crown of the plant.

Problem Solving: Reduce pests and diseases by planning, careful monitoring, and good horticultural practices. Who's at fault? Did you overwater, not provide good drainage or air circulation? Did you put the right plant in the wrong place, or did you select a plant poorly adapted to your area? Unfortunately, some herbs such as French Tarragon, Sweet Woodruff, and Lady's Mantle are seldom happy in the climate and soils of North Texas. Learn to say "no" to synthetic pesticides, since most are not registered for general use on herbs. Learn to say "yes" to biodiversity and beneficial insects and common sense.

Herbs for Small Spaces

Many herbs are quite well-suited for growing in small gardens and courtyards, narrow borders and pathways and small raised beds, as well as in a wide variety of containers. Because herbs can offer so much pleasure in so little room, they are wonderful plants for people who live in apartments, condos, and zero lot line homes. People who don't have the time or energy or strength to care for a large garden area often find that herbs are the answer to their gardening urges.

There are many advantages to container growing:

(1.) Pots can be moved to receive optimum growing conditions as the seasons change.
(2.) Invasive herbs can be controlled (watch out for those naughty mints!)
(3.) Tender herbs can be moved inside for protection from freezing temperatures.
(4.) Plants can be placed at a convenient height for watering, harvesting, and enjoyment.
(5.) No tilling or weeding is necessary.
(6.) Plants can be easily replaced as necessary, keeping containers attractive and productive.

Containers need to provide enough space to accommodate the root system of the herb, and drainage openings to prevent "wet feet." Plants are generally graduated to larger containers as they grow—this helps prevent overwatering a very small plant in a very large container. Ordinary garden soil does not drain well in containers, and it may harbor disease and insects. Use commercial soilless mixes that are light and fast draining, or blend your own.

Consider the wide variety of containers for growing herbs. What can you add to this list?

Terra Cotta, Ceramic, and Plastic Pots
Strawberry Jars
Cement Blocks
Old Wheelbarrows and Wagons
Wooden Tubs
Whiskey Barrels
Window Boxes
Hanging Baskets
Hypertufa Containers
Old Sinks, Horse Troughs

Herbs in containers are quite vulnerable to the elements. Check soil moisture every day, especially in warm weather. It is best to water in the morning, thoroughly soaking the root ball and keeping the foliage as dry as possible. During the heat of summer, try to raise containers off the concrete or brick. If you cannot bring containers indoors during freezing weather, try wrapping the pots with old carpeting or burlap. Cover the plants and place them in a protected location.

You may use a water soluble fertilizer about every two weeks during the growing season, or a balanced, time-release fertilizer designed for container grown plants. Remember that nutrients leach out rapidly with frequent summer waterings. Top-dress the container with mulch or finished compost.

Growing herbs indoors is problematic—a temporary solution at best for most gardeners, since the majority of herbs require far brighter light and better air circulation than the average home can provide. Plants will tend to become spindly; leaves will yellow and fall off, and the confused gardener will often overwater in an effort to save the herb. Insect and disease problems that are seldom experienced in the outdoor garden may create havoc indoors. The gardener may need to provide supplemental lighting and a fan for circulation. In most cases, herbs grown indoors will need to be periodically replaced, and will not be as productive as those grown outdoors.

Marian Buchanan, Dallas County Master Gardener

Starting the Kitchen Garden

Generally speaking, it is best to start rather small—with a limited number and variety of herbs, in order to avoid overwhelming the inexperienced gardener. One or two plants of each type will often be sufficient for a small family (no need for a 30 foot row of savory!) Keep in mind the mature size of each plant, to assist in spacing, and the moisture needs, to assist in grouping. Think about flavors you like and herbs you already use often. (Hate the taste of licorice? Don't put fennel at the top of your list to purchase.) Be aware that the "herb habit" is addictive—it won't be long before you are looking for more space in your perennial border or vegetable garden or another pot to add "just one more."

Do your homework (don't whine) before going to the garden center to buy plants. Amend the soil with organic matter (for good drainage) and be sure the location has a sunny exposure. Plan before you plant—both you and your herbs will be better off. Mild winter days can be a perfect time for this outdoor work, and you need an excuse to get off the couch!

Timing is everything. Some annual herbs prefer the cooler seasons of the year—cilantro and dill, for example. If you dawdle til June to plant them, they will never make a go of it. Better to wait until Fall and try again. Others like it hot, like basil. If you jump the gun in early spring, they will simply sulk and never thrive. Most perennial herbs (perennial to North Texas, that is) may be planted after frost danger is past, or early enough in the Fall to become established before cold weather arrives. Tender perennial herbs, or those that may be only marginally hardy in a North Texas winter, may be treated as annuals or grown in containers so that they can be protected.

Many annual herbs can be easily started from seed right in the garden (basil, chervil, cilantro, dill, arugula, and the biennial, parsley.) Perennials are much slower to establish from seed, and some of them, like the mints and thymes, may not produce exactly the variety or flavor you were expecting. Try transplants from the garden center for quicker gratification, or cuttings and divisions from friends' gardens. Choose the flavor and scent that appeals to you—a flavorless oregano at the nursery will not develop flavor later.

You may begin harvesting fresh herbs as soon as the plants are big enough to withstand some cutting. Gentle, regular pruning will induce plants to produce more new growth, tender and full of flavor. Avoid hard cutting in the extreme summer heat—some herbs, like the thymes may not recover from the trauma. (An exception is any annual herb nearing the end of its life cycle. The whole plant may be pulled up and all usable leaves harvested.) Generally speaking, the oil content of the plants is greatest in the morning hours, before the heat of midday, so harvesting is best done just after the dew has dried.

Look at the growth habit of the plant before pruning it. Plants growing from a central crown (parsley) or with a clumping habit (chives) are often cut around the outer edges, near ground level. Don't just give these plants a "butch" haircut. Woody or semi-woody plants (sage, rosemary) are often tip pruned, rather than having leaves pulled off at random. Entire branches may be removed to shape a woody herb or reduce its size.

Although fresh herbs for cooking are the ideal, the freshly preserved home harvest is a close second. Many herbs can be dried by hanging in small bundles, away from sunlight. Leaves can also be stripped off the cut stems and placed in a single layer to dry quickly on paper towels or screening. If space allows, small amounts of herbs can be dried in a frost-free refrigerator. Microwave and oven drying are often the last resort,

since it is far too easy to "cook" the herbs. When the leaves are crispy dry, they should be stored—as whole as possible—in tightly fitting containers in a cool, dark place (not in the kitchen window or on top of the stove!)

Since many herbs lose much of their flavor when dried, freezing is often a better alternative. Leaves may be frozen whole, on cookie sheets, and placed in freezer bags. Leaves can be chopped and covered with water in ice cube trays. These cubes can be put in freezer containers. The method of achieving the most intense, "fresh" flavor is to chop or puree leaves in a small amount of oil, creating a concentrated paste. These herb-and-oil mixtures must be frozen for safety, since bacteria can easily grow in an anaerobic, non-acid environment. Scrape or chunk off the amount needed for your recipe (remember that it is very concentrated) and return the container to the freezer. Properly stored, these blends should last six months to a year.

If you are just beginning to cook with fresh herbs, remember that the fragrant and flavorful oils will evaporate quickly, so add them in the last few minutes of cooking. (Bay is an exception. Rosemary, thyme and oregano can generally stand longer cooking, also.) Use the leaves and tender green tips only, since woody stems will be tough and bitter. Many cookbooks will indicate the amounts of either fresh or dried herbs to be used in a recipe. If there is no guide, you may need two to three times the volume of the dried herb called for, since the leaves shrink considerably as they dry. Don't be afraid to substitute, improvise and experiment as you season your food with your garden's bounty. You will quickly learn when a dish looks and smells right—not overpowered by the herb or seasoned so lightly that the herbal flavor is lost. You may wish to begin with some of the standard pairings—rosemary and lamb, mint and new potatoes–for example. But don't allow "rules" to stifle your creativity.

Plan to invest in a good herb reference book: Southern Herb Growing by Madalene Hill and Gwen Barclay is an excellent one for beginners and beyond. Check out cookbooks that are bursting with herbal flavors: The Herb Garden Cookbook by Lucinda Hutson is one that will tempt your tastebuds. Subscribe to a herb magazine like The Herb Companion. Join a local herb organization—there are many in the North Texas area that present educational programs and share information readily. (Check the calendar in your newspaper's garden section for meeting times and topics.) Harness your family computer to check out garden websites, herbal message boards and chats. The thyme is now to spice up your life!!!

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A Kitchen Herb Garden for North Texas

Basil: *Ocimum* spp. Most basils are warm season annuals, easily grown from seed once the soil and weather have warmed in late spring. Transplants can be purchased or grown from tip cuttings, too. Early and frequent light harvesting will prevent basils from going to seed too quickly, and will produce fuller, more attractive plants. There are many varieties of basil: some sweet, some spicy, some lemony, other camphory or medicinal and less suitable for culinary use. The summer harvest is readily preserved for winter use when chopped, processed with a small amount of oil, and frozen as a concentrated paste. Sweet basils form the backbone of many Mediterranean dishes; spicy basils are essential in Southeast Asian cooking. Basil may also be added to desserts and teas—even the flowers are edible. The plants grow rapidly in the summer, so feed and water them regularly.

Bay: *Laurus nobilis*. A nice container plant, bay needs protection from hot afternoon sun and extreme cold. It is hard to propagate, initially slow growing, and may be subject to scale. Leaves may be used fresh or dried, and are suitable for long cooking times, but they should be removed before serving. Do not confuse the plant with "California bay" or any of the toxic laurels.

Chives: *Allium schoenaprasum*. The delicate onion flavor is indispensable in the kitchen, and the small, clumping plants are pretty in a border. Lavender flowers (also edible) add a nice touch. Transplants are widely available at garden center, since chives grow rather slowly from seed. Leaves may be chopped and frozen with water in ice cube trays, since they do not dry well. Chives seem to appreciate regular feeding and supplemental moisture during dry spells. They may die to the ground in the coldest weather but will reappear reliably in early spring. Harvest by cutting whole leaves near the ground, around the outside edges of the clump. (Garlic chives, *Allium tuberosum*, are more rambunctious in both the kitchen and the garden. The leaves are flat—not tubular—and the flowers appear in summer in starry white clusters.)

Cilantro: *Coriandrum sativum*. A cool season annual, cilantro is easily grown from seed planted in early spring or, even better, in the fall. It will typically survive our winters and will produce large, leafy plants before going to seed as the weather warms up. The fresh leaves add a distinctive and authentic flavor to many regional cuisines—but they are an acquired taste for some people. Leaves can be processed in a small amount of oil and stored in the freezer. The ripened seeds, known as coriander, have a very different citrusy taste. Cilantro's tiny flowers are a magnet for beneficial insects.

Dill: *Anethum graveolens*. An annual easily grown from seed, dill performs best in the cooler weather of spring and fall. Unless the ripening seed heads are collected it will re-seed abundantly. This herb provides a one-two punch: both leaves and

seeds have a wide variety of culinary uses. Freezing the leaves in water, stock or oil is a preferred method of preserving the fresh flavor. Dill vinegars are delicious, too. Dwarfed varieties of dill may be more suitable to container growing, since common dill may reach 5 feet or more. Dill is a host plant for the swallowtail butterfly, and its flowers are attractive to beneficial insects.

Fennel: *Foeniculum vulgare*. A tall, feathery perennial, fennel should be grown separately from its look-a-like, dill. (Seedling crosses can result.) Mediterranean cooks prize the anise flavor of fennel's leaves, seeds and stems—so do swallowtail caterpillars. An annual bulbing type of fennel, called Florence fennel or finocchio, is not as well suited for our hot climate.

Lemon Grass: *Cymbopogon citratus*. A must for the teapot and for authentic Asian cuisines, lemon grass is not reliably winter hardy. Clumps may be dug in the fall and potted up for protection. Leaves may be used fresh, frozen or dried, but be careful since they are very sharp. Small pieces of the fleshy stems are often added to soups, stir-fries or teas and removed before serving.

Lemon Verbena: *Aloysia citriodora*. An ordinary looking spindly shrub, it has a heavenly flavor and aroma. Some winters it will survive outdoors, leafing out from the roots. If container grown, the plant will often lose its leaves and go dormant when brought inside. (Don't overwater!) Dried leaves retain their flavor for a very long time—nice for winter teas. Lemon verbena is wonderful in a variety of desserts—custards, cakes, breads, cookies—as well as in fruit salads.

Mexican Mint Marigold: *Tagetes lucida*. An attractive, anise-flavored herb native to South Texas and Mexico, this lovely plant deserves to be better known in the kitchen. It is reliably winter hardy, although it may die to the ground with a hard freeze. Small gold flowers appear in the fall. It is often used in herb vinegars, teas, salads, sauces, fish and chicken dishes.

Mints: *Mentha* spp. The many varieties of mint can be roughly divided into two flavor categories: spearmint and peppermint. Recipes calling for "mint" usually refer to a spearmint type. Mints are easily propagated from divisions or cuttings and are so vigorous that they must be contained to keep them from overrunning the garden. Harvest them frequently to encourage new growth and to prevent blooming. (Growing mint from seed may not produce exactly the plant you were expecting, since they hybridize readily. Some desirable varieties are sterile.) Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is a close relative and the original "no brainer" herb.

Oregano: *Origanum* spp. A large genus of low-growing, mostly perennial herbs, some oreganos are valuable in the kitchen, others highly ornamental in the garden. Oreganos are often grown from transplants, cuttings or divisions, since those grown from seed are quite variable. Avoid the flavorless or coarsely flavored

plants in the garden center unless you are looking for a plant that is strictly ornamental—and many of those do have eye-catching blooms. Let your nose and your palate be your guide. Sweet marjoram (*O. majorana*) is a delicately perfumed, tender perennial of this genus.

Parsley: *Petroselinum crispum.* A biennial often grown as an annual, parsley performs best in the cooler seasons and will stay green all winter. As it begins to bloom, the leaves become tougher and the plant is usually replaced. Parsley can be grown from seed. Germination will be hastened if the seeds are pre-soaked. Two familiar forms exist: the curly leafed type and a flat leafed (Italian) type with a more pronounced flavor. Use the leaves fresh or frozen. Swallowtail butterflies will seek out the plants to lay their eggs, so plant plenty!

Rosemary: *Rosmarinus officinalis*. Handsome in the garden and indispensable in the kitchen, rosemary is one the best loved herbs. It is very slow to grow from seed, so transplants, cuttings or layerings are preferred methods of propagation. Many upright varieties are reliably winter hardy—the creeping or prostrate varieties less so. Rosemary may be used frozen or dried, but since it is evergreen, why bother?

Sage: *Salvia* spp. The common garden sages (*S. officinalis*) are native to the Mediterranean, and they often prove difficult to grow in humid conditions and heavy clay soil. They are sensitive to overwatering and prone to fungal diseases. But the complexity of the fresh flavor far surpasses the musty taste of commercially packaged sage. Hundreds of other sages are found in the New World. Not all of them belong in the kitchen, but many are highly ornamental, thriving in every conceivable garden condition: shade, bogs, deserts, high altitudes.

Salad Burnet: *Poterium sanguisorba.* This small, mounding evergreen perennial produces its best cucumber flavor in the cooler seasons. Easily started from seed, salad burnet is lovely in cream cheese spreads, dips, herb butters, vinegars, and salads, of course.

Scented Geraniums: *Pelargonium* spp. This large family of tender perennials from South Africa offers a wide range of scent, flavor, texture, leaf shape and color for the beginning herb grower. Although the blooms are not typically large and showy, the plants are attractive in containers or grown as annuals in beds and borders. Most are easily started from cuttings. The rose, lemon and mint scented varieties are especially useful in teas, desserts, scented sugars and vinegars. The edible flowers are beautiful in ice cubes or scattered on salads, cakes and puddings. Many of the scenteds are used in potpourri, perfumes, soaps and cosmetics. Some varieties are sensitive to overwatering; most will appreciate afternoon protection from hot sun.

Thyme: *Thymus* spp. In spite of their tiny leaves and small stature, the thymes pack a punch in the kitchen and garden. With hundreds of varieties and hybrids, thymes are often propagated by cuttings, layerings or divisions in order to get "true" types. Most thymes grown in well drained soil and adequate sunshine will be winter hardy throughout Texas. They are generally divided into three groups: upright "shrublets" commonly used in cooking, creeping varieties 3-6 inches tall, and very flat creepers only an inch or two tall. Leaves hold their flavor if dried quickly or frozen in oil. Note: stripping the leaves from cut branches is very thyme-consuming!

Winter Savory: *Satureja Montana*. A perennial low-growing evergreen, winter savory has tiny leaves with a peppery, spicy bite. Harvest the tender new growth for best flavor in hearty bean dishes, soups and stews. This herb should be better known in American kitchens, especially in the Southwest, where jalapenos reign. (The annual summer savory, *S. hortensis*, doesn't last long in our hot climate.)

--Wishing you good taste and good growing—

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