

Finally, it's May, and time to start growing. Are culinary herbs on the list of plants you'd like to grow? If not, then consider growing these miracles of flavour and aroma.

Leaves, flowers or seeds from culinary herbs add pleasure and nutrition to our diet. If you're new to gardening, herbs are great starter plants. They're easy to grow and relatively pest free. They can grow in herb, vegetable or flower gardens as well as containers. This makes them ideal for many spaces.

Herb tags and seed packets will give you information on whether the herb is an annual, biennial or perennial. Information also includes preferred growing conditions, space needed and best time to sow relative to frost date.

I like to sow my annual herb seeds directly into containers or my garden bed to limit damaging roots when transplanting. Basil, dill and summer savory plants are easy to grow from seed. Some herb seeds like parsley have a tough outer shell and will need to be scratched with sandpaper or soaked for 24-36 hours in hot water to soften. Other herb seeds may require a period of cold before they will germinate.

Perennial herbs are often best started from cuttings or transplants. Some do not produce seed or come true from seed and some can take up to three years from seed to reach harvest size. In addition to garden centres, local garden club sales often have herbs for you to purchase as members share their growing successes.

When purchasing herbs, a good idea is to rub your fingers over a leaf to check for scent or even, in the case of tarragon and oregano, to taste a leaf. French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus* var. *sativa*) is preferred for culinary use rather than the flavourless Russian tarragon (*A. dracunculus*). Flavours can vary in oregano, so sampling a leaf can indicate the presence of the flavour you enjoy. Plants can be mislabelled so do the finger rub.

As with real estate, your success will be much greater if you choose the right location! Most herbs require six hours of sun per day and well-draining, moderately fertile soil. They don't like wet feet and should not be over-fertilized. Too much nitrogen can reduce the production of essential oils, resulting in less flavour. The medium for container grown herbs should be a soilless mix labelled as container or potting mix.

If combining herbs in a container, choose herbs that have same growing conditions. Mediterranean herbs such as sage, rosemary, thyme and oregano work well together. You may want to try several varieties of the same herb together. Have fun choosing containers – upcycle and repurpose. It is common in Europe to see basil grown in attractive recycled olive oil cans.

With so many herbs; where do you start? Take a look in your kitchen cupboard for favourite and most used culinary herbs. Start there and consider growing a few of them. Most of us have limited garden space on our urban lots and balconies, so be practical and grow what you'll use.

I've often decided to grow a particular herb based on a recipe. Lovage, a celery-flavoured herb, made its way into my garden after I read a potato scallop recipe in a favourite cookbook. Likewise, after I tasted Sweet Cicely tea biscuits, this aniseed-flavoured herb made its way into another garden bed. It is an attractive herb with fern like leaves and delicate white spring flowers. It is one of the few herbs that can grow in shade. Sweet Cicely leaves can be used to sweeten stewed fruit, yogurt and to reduce sugar in baking.

As a transplanted Prince Edward Islander, the annual summer savory is an essential herb in my garden. Traditionally in Atlantic Canadian homes, this herb is used in stuffings and meat pies. It is a common ingredient in herbes de Provence. Other annual herbs I enjoy growing are basil, parsley, cilantro (also called coriander) and pineapple sage. Bay and rosemary are tender perennials that I grow in pots and bring indoors for winter use. Sage, oregano, thyme, winter savory and mint overwinter nicely in my garden. I have brushed away the snow to harvest sage (*Salvia officinalis*) leaves in winter. For mints, I prefer spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) as it is less likely to overpower a culinary dish. As all mints are aggressive spreaders, grow them in a container!

Harvest the herbs throughout the summer to use and enjoy. Late in the season you may wish to preserve some for future use. I dry savory and oregano; freeze lovage and parsley (stalks and leaves) and make a paste in ice cube trays with tarragon, basil and sage. You may try making herb flavoured vinegars, oils, honey, salts, butter and teas. The possibilities are endless and not that difficult, especially with many resources online and at the library to assist you. Imagine the delight of your friends and family if you accompany a salad with a pretty jar of tasty chive flower vinegar.

Growing herbs and preparing meals with them lead to lovely culinary experiences, but more importantly for you and your family, often provide an additional health benefit too. They add variety and enhance flavour, reducing the use of less healthy additives such as salt, sugar and fat. There add virtually no additional calories. When I add 1 teaspoon of oregano to my pasta sauce, the University of Michigan Health System - *Cooking with Herbs and Spices* (2013) tells me it contains as much antioxidants as 3 cups of broccoli! Remember, culinary herbs are always recommended for use in small amounts.

So start growing culinary herbs for great taste, flavour interest and good health. I guarantee it will increase your gardening joy.

### Quick Tips for Growing Herbs

- Good herbs for beginners are parsley, chives, sage, rosemary, thyme, mint, basil and oregano.
- Don't be in a hurry to move basil plants outdoors as it is tender. A cool spring night can set this plant back by weeks.
- Seedlings and transplants grown indoors, including garden centre purchases, need a period of adjustment when moved outdoors. They can be "hardened off" by taking them outside for longer and longer periods over several days.
- Try to mimic the growing conditions of the area where the herb is native.
- If it is necessary to fertilize container grown herbs, a helpful guide is to apply it at ½ strength and less frequently.
- Perennial herbs benefit from an annual side dressing of organic matter.
- Herbs attract many beneficial insects to your garden and help control pests.

Check out Master Gardeners' of Ottawa-Carleton and Lanark County online resource: The Edible Garden - [http://mgottawa.ca/The\\_Edible\\_Garden.php](http://mgottawa.ca/The_Edible_Garden.php)

Mixed herbs – photo taken by Julianne Labreche

- Several herbs can be grown in a fairly small space.



Drying summer savory –  
photo by Nancy McDonald  
- Hang summer savory  
bunches in a warm dry  
place until dry, at least two  
weeks.