



Prince Edward County Master Gardeners

Why grow fresh herbs?

Especially when dried herbs and some fresh herbs are available all year in your local super-market?

Once you have tasted fresh mint sauce, (made with the correct mint) on your roast lamb, fresh sage in your sage and onion stuffing, with duck or turkey, fresh tarragon tucked in the cavity of your grilled trout, a sprig of lemon balm in your iced tea, a bouquet garni brush used to brush oil on your grilling beef, even a selection of fragrant herbs in a vase on your dinner table, I am sure you will want to grow a few of this easily grown, huge range of plants.

To make a bouquet garni brush, take a selection of herbs: rosemary, sage, thyme etc. tie together, like a twig broom. Herbs are often put together with spices, but they are very different. Herbs are the flowers, leaves, stems and roots of plants grown in moderate climates. Spices are nuts, fruits, bark, seeds etc. of shrubs and vines grown in tropical climates. Herbs are often divided into groups:

culinary, fragrant/ornamental, medicinal/insecticidal, although these groups are not very rigid. It is not necessary to have a formal herb garden or a knot garden, herbs grow almost anywhere that you have a good friable soil and sunshine, in a mixed border, container, vegetable garden, or hanging basket. Herbs do not need very fertile soil, just a little compost. In fact lush growing herbs, do not have the flavour or scent of plants that have been grown in less rich soil.

If you want to pick a few stems for your cooking, then a site near your kitchen, or a container near your door that you can easily reach in all weathers would be best. Most herbs are very decorative and look attractive in a mixed or perennial border. Parsley, purple basil, chives, thyme all make nice edging, lavender, fennel, sage, especially the variegated varieties look well in the middle section. If you are looking for a nice tall plants to make a background of plants that don't need much staking then costmary, tansy, dill, bergamot, lovage, comfrey, will all give good results.

If you have a large hosta bed, under planting with sweet woodruff will not only keep weeds from growing but help to keep slugs away. Herbs in containers on your deck are very attractive, but also provide delightful aroma when you pass, strawberry jars, in particular the large ones make culinary herbs convenient. Make sure that you put a perforated tube, full of vermiculite down the middle of the jar to ensure even watering. Don't forget to give the pot a quarter turn every day or so to ensure all the plants receive the same amount of sunshine.

A large bay tree, or rosemary will provide a great plant on your deck and will continue to look good indoors in the winter. Growing herbs in your vegetable garden has many advantages, companion planting being one. Companion planting is growing certain plants that can benefit others when planted in close proximity. This subject will be dealt with in later articles.

There are so many herbs to talk about; this article can only give a taster. Here are some suggestions for herbs that grow well in The County.

ANNUALS

Basil. Do not plant outside until the temperature is +7/8 regularly at night. But you can start the seeds inside. There are many varieties, choose one you like, and enjoy freshly made pesto.

Calendulas or English marigolds. Seeds germinate easily; this plant is a companion for many others as it deters insects. Petals can be used in salads and can be used in place of saffron when dried.

Parsley technically this is a bi-annual, but tastes very bitter the second year and does not always over-winter. Your choice of flat or curly depends on your taste. Grow as a border plant or in containers very good in strawberry jars.

Borage the young leaves/flowers are good in salad.

Dill this grows easily from seed and will seed itself for next year.

Stevia although this seed is expensive, it makes an excellent substitute for sugar fresh or dried.

Nasturtiums although not strictly a herb, the seeds germinate easily, I like the Alaska variety. The leaves are variegated the flowers pale colours. You can eat the leaves which are peppery, edible flowers can be filled with cream cheese etc. When dried, the seeds can be added to pickles.

Chamomile this can be very invasive as it self-seeds, it is usually used for teas. If you know your Beatrix Potter you will remember that Peter Rabbits mother gave him this to drink at bed time to help him sleep.

Fennel the bronze variety looks good in a border, both the flowers & seeds taste of aniseed and go well with fish.

PERENNIALS

Mint. This is a waterside plant & very invasive The English variety “ *Mentha spicata*” is what you need for mint sauce, although the chocolate variety is great with ice-cream. Especially if you “paint” one side of the leaf with melted chocolate. I suggest you grow it in an old blue box or large container, sunk to the rim. It does really well on the edge of a stream or pond.

Chives. Easy to grow I like the garlic variety which has flat leaves & flowers in autumn you can eat leaves & flowers.

Lemon balm. Although this is a type of mint it is not invasive. Use for teas, especially iced tea.

Thyme. Again many varieties the French has the best flavour but is rather straggly. The lemon varieties are good with fish.

Lovage. This very tall plant can be used in place of celery. The hollow stems make great stirring sticks for caesars, especially when topped with a sprig of leaves.

Oregano. Very hardy, easy to grow I prefer the kaliteri variety, an essential for pizza & Italian cooking.

Winter savoury. Although not as much flavour as the summer variety, it is hardy.

French tarragon. This cannot be grown from seed, the seed is always Russian tarragon, very invasive and tastes like grass. The French is available as plants, grows slowly but over-winters well.

Salad Burnett this herb is not well known in Ontario but very common in England. It tastes of cucumber is great for salads especially good if you cannot eat regular cucumber.

To gather herbs at their most flavourful pick “after the dew has left and before the sun has heated up”

If you would like to try some unusual herbs I suggest that you look at <https://www.richters.com/>, or call them at 1-800-668-4372. Their catalogue of thousands of herbs from around the world is a joy and full of information. They have a postal service, but a visit to their greenhouses is very special.

By Barbra Stock

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Or visit our website at: <https://pecmastergardeners.com/>