The Herb Garden
Growing & Cooking with Herbs
a potted history of herbs

"A herb is the friend of physicians and the praise of cooks" - Charlemagne

Since ancient times the herb garden has been essential. Historically the earliest known herb garden was documented in Babylon around 6,000 years ago, and belonged to King Mardukapal. We know that herbs were important to the Egyptian, Roman, Ancient Greek, Native American, Indian and Chinese peoples. Records also show that these versatile and useful plants were utilised from Druid times, through the middle ages and into the twentieth century, and their story makes fascinating reading.

The uses of herbs vary from medicinal and culinary, to scent and cleansing (many books are available on the subject). It can be argued that these diverse plants, in their own way, represent our well being through the ages. At one time every home, monastery or manor would have had its own herb garden where the rudiments of the medicine cabinet would be found.

The versatility of herbs was also a major factor in their popularity, take chamomile for example. This particular plant aids indigestion and treats burns, has antiseptic and sedative properties. Chamomile tea is very popular in aiding sleep and makes a calming drink, splashed on the face and arms it is also an effective insect repellent, and that same tea makes a fragrant hair rinse for blondes. Not bad!

traditional uses and reputed benefits

- **Peppermint** - calms the stomach and nervous system, it also aids digestion.
- **Garlic** - good for the blood circulation, has antiseptic and fungicidal properties.
- **Parsley** - another one for the blood, plus chewing sweetens the breath (especially after eating garlic).
- **Thyme** - the Sumerians used it as an antiseptic, the Egyptians in embalming, the Greeks as a massage, and good all round medicine.
- **Calendula (Pot Marigold)** - antiseptic: makes an excellent ointment for skin conditions.
- **Tarragon** - toothache (and snakebites, the roots do look a little serpentine)
- **Sage** - fevers, epilepsy, eye problems, memory loss and infection (Charlemagne had sage grown in all of the royal gardens).

Monasteries were small independent communities who needed to grow their own vegetables and other essentials on site. They also acted as our first hospitals, growing their own herbs for healing the sick and infirm, and the list of medicinal herbs grown is extensive.

Both before and after the reformation most villages would have had their wise women and cunning-men who knew the properties of the local herbs as medicine, and also for their cosmetic value. All soaps and cleaning materials would have come from natural sources; herbs, honey and lard formed the basis of most ointments and tinctures, and most tonics came from the hedgerow or the garden. This remained the norm until the advent of chemistry, the apothecaries, physicians, and the witch fever of later centuries.

Another important job for herbs was the flavouring of food and this, at least, hasn’t changed much. In fact there has even been a resurgence of some herbs with the popularity of modern regional cooking, such as Basil and Coriander, that have both seen new varieties bred, with the popularity of Indian and Italian cuisine.
preserving your herbs

Herb leaves can be dried, frozen or used fresh. While nothing can beat the taste of freshly picked herbs it’s easy to preserve them so you can get year long flavour in your cooking.

Pick herbs for both drying and freezing, just before they flower, this is when the leaves contain the most oil and it is this that produces the flavour and aroma. Pick the topmost, tenderest new stalks and remove any flowers.

freezing herbs

Most herbs are easiest to freeze complete on the stalk, just gather a bunch and place in a plastic bag. When you need to use some of the herb just snip the required amount off the bunch. You can also just freeze the leaves by removing them from the stalk and laying them out individually on a baking tray in the freezer. Then once they have frozen they can be collected together in one container without sticking to one another.

Another convenient way to store herbs for use in soups, casseroles and sauces is to finely chop the herb prior to putting in ice cube trays covered with a little water. Basil tends to lose its colour when frozen so puree it in a blender with just a little olive oil before transferring into ice cube trays.

Herbs most suited to freezing: Basil, Chives, Parsley, Coriander.

drying herbs

Slow air drying is the best way to preserve the flavour and aroma of herbs, the slow, natural evaporation of the moisture means that the optimum amount of oil is left.

Take a bunch of your favourite herbs, wash, drain and blot them. Make sure they are as dry as possible as wet herbs will go mouldy before they dry out. Tie the stems together and place in a cool shady area. Leave for about 2 weeks or until the herbs are thoroughly dried. If you do not have a dark or shady place to dry the herbs then try putting them in a paper bag, making sure you make a few holes in it for ventilation.

Once the herbs are dry, store in airtight containers or plastic bags. You can strip the dried leaves from the stems but try to keep the leaves as intact as possible as it is whole herbs that retain the most flavour.

Herbs most suited to drying: Thyme, Rosemary, Bay, Sage, Tarragon.

and... the flavour of herbs can be preserved in oils and vinegars, butter and even jellies. There are numerous recipes to be found.

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popular herbs

basil
A tender annual that originated in India, although this popular herb is more commonly connected with Italian cooking. Basil is primarily a culinary herb, a member of the mint family and the perfect partner for tomatoes, it is also a key ingredient in the popular Pesto sauce. Basils are a source of essential oil for use in foods, flavourings, and fragrances. The green aromatic leaves are used in salads and can be used fresh or dried with stews, vegetables, poultry, meat, vinegars, and pasta dishes. The citrus variety is a good companion for fish. There are many different varieties of Basil available including cinnamon and purple leaved cultivars.

growing information - Basil is an annual, thriving in a sunny and well drained soil that contains well rotted manure or good compost. Unlike other herbs it doesn’t tolerate drought, so never let it dry out. Keep pinching out any flowers as once it produces seed the leaves will lose the strong flavour. This is the ideal herb to grow on the windowsill for fresh herbs at your fingertips. It will remain very happy in a sunny spot indoors throughout the winter months.

trivia - The use of chives has been documented in China for 5,000 years.

chives
This little hardy perennial is rich in vitamins A and C and is the mildest member of the onion family. The mellow flavour makes it ideal for peppering up otherwise bland dishes like mashed potato and cottage cheese. A good companion for cheese without the overpowering aftertaste of onion, and gives a lift to salads, soups and dips of mayonnaise or sour cream. Combined with equal portions of Tarragon, Chervil and Parsley it is one of the herbs that make up the traditional seasoning ‘fines herbes’. This aromatic blend works well with chicken, fish and egg dishes.

growing information - Chives are grown easily from seed, it is a hardy perennial so will reward you year after year. This tough little plant grows in full sun or partial shade and will thrive in almost any soil. Winter hardy and drought tolerant, its hard to go wrong. Harvest by snipping off the leaves to about an inch long. The blossoms also make a tasty addition to salads adding colour and flavour.

trivia - Although it is used mainly for cooking, this herb is surrounded by folklore. It is a symbol for love in Italy, but stands for malice in Greece. Traditionally it has been given as a good-luck present to new homeowners. Being a member of the mint family, basil is recommended as a digestive aid, and basils have been known to treat headaches, coughs and stomach disorders.

coriander
This versatile herb contains two distinct flavourings. Firstly the spice Coriander which is the seed of this small plant. Flat and round, they are dried when ripe and have a sweet and aromatic scent. This spice is very prominent in curry powders. The seeds can also be used in stews and soups, and blend well with smoked meats and game, featuring in traditional English black pudding recipes and Italian motadella sausage. Coriander is also used as a pickling and pudding spice, and is used in cakes, breads and other baked goods.

The leaves and stems are ideal for spicy foods such as Southern US, Mexican, Spanish, Middle Eastern, Indian and Oriental cooking, often sprinkled like parsley over the top or pureed within the dish. The root is also used in Thai cooking to flavour meats, curries and soups.

growing information - A hardy annual, coriander can be sown in the spring and prefers full sun with a well drained soil. The leaves can be picked when young and tender, and the seeds harvested when they are ripe.

trivia - Both Coriander and Cilantro have been used since ancient times. Both appear in ancient texts including the bible, and both are used medicinally in the treatment of stomach and intestinal troubles. It’s interesting to see how many other healing properties this particular herb is purported to possess. In addition it is rich in vitamins A and C - a real wonder herb!

dill
This tasty herb is another dual flavouring variety, harvesting the leaves in the spring/summer followed by the seed in Autumn. The crisp, fresh tasting leaves are a natural with fish, mild cheeses, egg and vegetable dishes, cream sauces and potatoes. Cucumber partners well with dill, either in salads, chilled soups or sandwiches. It is best to use the leaves fresh to make the most of the clean flavour. If used in cooked dishes like stews, be sure to add it just before serving, as the heat will kill the flavour.

growing information - Dill is a native of the Mediterranean and requires full sun and rich soil to thrive (it will tolerate afternoon shade). It is considered a hardy annual and is not too bothered about periods of drought. Sow fairly close together as the plants reach around three feet in height and will help to support each other. Sow every two weeks for a continuous supply.

trivia - Tea made with dill seed relieves colic, indigestion, nausea, and is a known relaxant. Gripe Water is made with dill seed, and it is recorded that it was used at Charlemagne court in the 8th century. Dill is rich in vitamin C, minerals, flavenoids and calcium. Plant with Calendula (Pot Marigold) for a stunning display.
**garlic**

The cooking ‘must have’ and cure all. According to folklore it will ward off anything from the common cold to the plague (not to mention vampires and mosquitoes). The most powerful member of the onion family, garlic is the staple of many types of cookery. It is at its strongest when crushed, and adding it late in the cooking stage keeps its pungency - the longer it cooks the sweeter the flavour. Store in a cool, dry place.

Do not keep it in the fridge or a sealed container. Once it sprouts it’s past its best - throw it out.

**Growing information** - Growing your own garlic is simple, choose a sunny site where the soil isn’t too damp. Each bulb of garlic consists of up to 15 cloves, plant each clove upright (pointed end to the top) about an inch beneath the surface, and about 4” apart. It couldn’t be easier, just keep the weeds down and water regularly.

**Trivia** - Garlic was considered to be a protector, it warded off many nasty illnesses and infections along with evil spirits including vampires, werewolves and other assorted demons. It certainly does have strong antibacterial qualities and was used to prevent gangrene during WWI and WWII. It thins the blood in a manner similar to aspirin and was seen as good for the circulation in general. Garlic has a reputation of being a preventative of the common cold, (also good at fighting one off), and as an expectorant cure for coughs and croup.

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**lavender**

Lavender essential oil is very popular, as is dried lavender, for its relaxation and sleep inducing properties - but it also has culinary uses too. French farmers graze their lambs in lavender fields to pass the fresh floral flavour to the meat.

The leaves of the lavender bush (the English variety or Officinalis) can be used in the same way as Rosemary. It can be teamed with lamb, used in breads such as foccachia, and it also works well with other herbs. Use alongside fennel, oregano, rosemary, thyme, sage and summer and winter savoury, try it with soups and stews. Use sparingly as too much can be bitter. The flowers are excellent when sprinkled into a glass of champagne, or over chocolate cakes, biscuits, sorbets or ice cream. The use of lavender sugar imparts the delicate fragrance to puddings and biscuits too without adding the flowers to the mix.

**Growing information** - This little shrub is very easy to grow and there can be few gardens where a lavender bush can’t be found somewhere. A hardy perennial, they will flower year after year, just keep clipped to maintain a bushy plant. Lavenders are one of the drought resistant herbs ideal for sunny and dryer areas. Grow from seed or from cuttings.

**Trivia** - Well known as a therapeutic herb, lavender can be used internally for indigestion, irritability, anxiety, exhaustion, tension headaches and bronchial complaints. Space is too restrictive to list all of the other properties and uses of lavender, but it has to be said that there’s a lot more to this herb than just perfume, and if you have to make room for just one herb, this would have to be the one!

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**marjoram**

Marjoram is a native of the Mediterranean area and was well known to the Greeks and Romans who considered it a symbol of happiness. It has a delicate minty-citrus flavour that will not overpower other ingredients when cooking. In fact, as it loses flavour during the cooking process it needs to be added fairly late in the proceedings, try it in soups or stews. Its fresh taste will enhance salad dressings, seafood sauces and poultry. It also works very well with cheese, tomato, bean or egg dishes. Marjoram is one of the key ingredients in the French flavouring Fines Herbes, and is frequently used in delicate fish dishes. It also compliments lamb, beef and veal. Marjoram blends well with parsley, dill, basil or thyme.

**Growing information** - Sow seed in spring, or grow from cuttings in summer. This herb enjoys full sun and is not too fussy about soil type, but it does need to be kept moist. Keep the plants pinched back to keep from getting leggy and setting seed.

**Trivia** - Used in the Middle Ages as a sign of everlasting love and honour, bridal couples wore wreaths of marjoram. Medicinally it was used in the relief of asthma, rheumatism, indigestion and toothache. As a gargle or tea it could help with sinus congestion and hay fever. If ground into a paste and mixed with oatmeal it made a poultice to relieve arthritic and rheumatic pain. Skin ulcers, abrasions, and boils.

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**oregano**

Often confused with Marjoram Oregano is often called ‘wild marjoram’. Its robust flavour is frequently called for in the recipes of Italian, Greek, North African and Mexican dishes. Oregano’s pungent spicy flavour is perfect for tomato based sauces, seafood and grilled meats. It is synonymous with pizza and Italian cooking in general.

**Growing information** - Grow in the same way as marjoram, sowing seed in the spring or grow from cuttings in the summer. This herb needs full sun but requires drier conditions than marjoram. Oregano can work well in a pot along with rosemary, sage and thyme, as they all have the same moisture requirements. Keep on the windowsill or by the kitchen door.

**Trivia** - Despite its heavy association with Italian cooking, oregano is indigenous to Greece where its name means ‘joy of the mountain’. The ancient Greeks would graze their cattle in fields of oregano in the belief that it produced tastier meat. Many of its medicinal uses are the same as marjoram, being beneficial for conditions ranging from bronchial congestion to toothache.
**parsley**

These days it seems that curly leaved parsley has become mainly a garnish for other dishes. However, parsley is a very versatile herb and, with a fresh flavour and crispy texture, it adds a tasty bite to many dishes. Fresh or dried parsley can be added to omelettes, scrambled eggs, mashed potatoes, soups, pasta, vegetable dishes and sauces to go with fish, poultry, veal and pork. The classic parsley sauce is a well known fish accompaniment. It is traditionally featured in well known herb blends like ‘fines herbes’ (with chervil, chives and tarragon), and in bouquet garni along with thyme, marjoram and bay leaves.

Flat leaved, or Italian parsley is found in Moroccan dishes. It is more frequently used in cooking as it has a stronger flavour than the curled, and it stands up well to heat. It is also good for white sauces where the freshness of parsley is required without the colour bleed - the stems are used here rather than the leaves. Persillade and Gremolada are two classic sauces which have parsley as one of their main ingredients.

**Growing information** - Growing from seed is a slow process and it is wise to soak the seeds overnight. Keep in warm conditions to begin with. There is an old saying that ‘parsley goes to hell and back nine times before sprouting’ and it does take them weeks to get going. Once they do grow they require part, rather than full sun, and need regular watering. Parsley is a biennial but is generally treated as an annual, so you will need to bring on a new crop every year.

**Trivia** - Parsley is rich in vitamins and minerals, particularly A and C. It also reduces inflammations, and its high chlorophyl content means it is a great breath freshener. The juice has been used to treat toothache and as a hair rinse or as a facial steam for dry skin. It has been used as a medicinal herb since the days of Hippocrates and interestingly most of its healing claims have been confirmed by modern science.

**rosemary**

This popular herb is a native of the Mediterranean, growing wild in coastal regions. It is widely used in cooking and perfumery. With its unique flavour and scent it is a perfect partner for all meats and vegetables, it is traditionally used in Mediterranean dishes as it works extremely well with garlic and tomatoes.

Delicious in breads such as foccachia, it’s exceptional flavour really enhances sauces and potato dishes of all kinds. Add it to baked beans along with some garlic on toast or a baked potato, and you have a dish lifted far from the ordinary. Being easy to grow and ever green it is always ready for a few snippings to be taken.

**Growing information** - Rosemary can be grown from seed, or bought as a small plant. It is easily grown in a sunny position in well drained soil that is not too rich, and with care can be grown in a container. Being a Mediterranean herb it does not like to be too wet, so water it regularly, but only enough to keep the soil moist. Rosemary is easily propagated by cuttings: place in water, or in a small pot of damp compost until it develops its own roots.

**Trivia** - Having antibacterial, anti fungal, antioxidant properties, it is widely used in alternative medicine. During World War II rosemary and juniper berries were burned to disinfect hospital facilities. It is used for stomach problems, stimulating hair follicles in cases of premature baldness and treating headaches.

**sage**

A real old favourite, but this herb is far more than just good in stuffing. It works well with pork, sausage, goose and lamb because it aids the digestion of the fat. Being a very powerful flavouring it should be used sparingly, and unusually with herbs, should be added early in the cooking process so that the flavour becomes more subtle - sage is perfect for casseroles and stews as it withstands the long cooking times well. Sage works well with vegetables, particularly potatoes, and cheese. The flowers are also edible and make a tasty (and pretty) addition to salads, they have milder flavour than the leaves.

**Growing information** - Sage is very easy to grow and prefers a warm, sunny location. It is not particular about soil, except that it should be well-drained. Seed can be sown outside from March through until May. The resulting seedlings should develop into strong healthy plants by the following summer. They can also be propagated by root cuttings.

**Trivia** - As well as being a kitchen herb, sage was used in folk medicine and has links to many cultures all over the world. It is thought to have originated in Syria and spread throughout the northern Mediterranean, through Europe and then onto the rest of the world.

**thyme**

Last but not least, thyme is invaluable in the kitchen and this friendly little herb blends well with, and enhances, many others. It is one of the main components of bouquet garni. When combined with fresh sprigs of parsley and bay leaves it will enliven soups, stews and sauces. It is also a key element in the traditional, dried aromatic blend Herbes de Provence. This seasoning is ideal for meats, stews, sauces, vegetables and dressings, adding a taste that is reminiscent of sunny hillsides. But that’s not all, it also goes well with cheese and makes a superb herb butter.

There are over 100 varieties of thyme which are all fragrant, the three that are best placed in the kitchen are lemon, caraway and common thyme.

**Growing information** - This native of the Mediterranean prefers a light, well drained soil in full sun. It can be grown from seed or propagated from root cuttings. Water when the weather is particularly dry and feed probably once a year. It will grow happily in rockeries and on pathways where the scent of the leaves can be released by treading on it or brushing through it. Its pretty pink flowers are an attractive focal point too.

**Trivia** - Thyme was an antiseptic to the Sumerians, an embalming herb to the Egyptians; used by the Greeks in massage and bath oils, incense in temples and as an aphrodisiac. The origin of the name comes from the Greek ‘thymon' meaning courage. The Romans associated thyme with courage and vigour, bathing in thyme scented water to prepare themselves for battle; Scottish Highlanders would prepare a tea of wild thyme for the same purpose.

Thyme is reputed to ward off nightmares and to relieve hangovers. In folklore thyme is associated with the activities of the fairies, and with its elfin leaves, delicate pink flowers, rich flavour and scent, its easy to see how it could be associated with all things elusive and magical.
handy hints and money saving tips

For fresh herbs through the winter, grow some on a sunny window sill.

Fresh herbs will keep for about a week in a jar or plastic bag in the fridge.

If using fresh herbs instead of dried in a recipe, use about 2/3 times the recommended quantity of dried (drying intensifies the flavour).

Keep flowers pinched back to keep the flavour in the leaves, and prevent the plant going to seed.

Harvest herbs for drying or freezing on a dry day in the morning.

When harvesting different herbs, keep them separate so that the aroma of one doesn’t impair the flavour of another.

Dry in a cool dark place and store in airtight containers in the dark.

Keep your herbs labelled whether drying or freezing.

When using dried herbs in a dish, rub the herb between the thumb and finger, or bruise with a mortar and pestle to release the flavour and aroma.

When barbecuing toss some rosemary or sage leaves onto the coals. The fragrant smoke will flavour the food and add extra ambience by scenting the evening air.

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