

Herb Growing 101

My longing for spring is intense. Even if you are not planning your garden just yet, you can still get an herb garden going.

Fresh herbs are easy to grow and a wonderful addition to almost anything you are cooking—even desert. Think about what a beautiful garnish fresh mint is to a simple bowl of ice cream and a fancy cookie. Fresh herbs not only dramatically improve the flavor of your homemade masterpieces, but they also perk up ready-made dishes. For example, if you use bottled spaghetti sauce, toss in some fresh minced basil, thyme, and oregano. The sauce immediately tastes “homemade.” Ditto with store-bought pizza sauce. Purchasing those little bundles from the grocery can really add up, especially when you might only need a tablespoon or two. A great solution to all of your herb dilemmas is to plant your own herb garden.

Herbs are very easy to grow—as long as they have sunlight. They need about 6 to 8 hours of sunlight a day, so pick your spot accordingly. If your yard does not have a particularly sunny spot, plant your herb garden in pots. Just place the pots on the deck, patio, or front porch. Though you can grow herbs from seed, I usually buy them already as plants. That way I can start using them right away. If you are planting the herbs outdoors, cultivate your soil with some organic humus or other soil conditioner. Herbs enjoy loamy soil, but will tolerate some soil hardened with our Georgia clay. If you are planting herbs in pots, use any standard potting soil. To help herbs flourish, use a liquid fertilizer every ten days or so. You probably will not have to worry about insects, since most are actually repelled by aromatic herbs.

Fresh herbs not only infuse your cooking, but also make terrific garnishes. Imagine the difference between a mound of plain mashed potatoes, and a mound of white potatoes garnished with finely minced chives. As a summer side dish, slice some fresh tomatoes, drizzle them with some olive oil, and garnish with some minced basil and thyme—voila, you look like a gourmet chef. I also love to toss fresh herbs into a plain green salad—you will be surprised how this really adds interest to an otherwise average salad. If you have not had much experience with fresh herbs, just experiment and see what you like.

Once you start using fresh herbs, most dried herbs seem bland and often even tasteless. There are so many varieties of herbs; you may not know where to begin. A good basic herb collection might include: parsley, thyme, oregano, basil, mint, sage, rosemary, and chives. If you cook often, you might want to add tarragon, marjoram, dill, coriander, and chervil. Once you begin growing herbs, you will probably be more willing to experiment with them.

Making herb infused oils and vinegars is easy and delicious. Try several varieties to see which flavors you like best. My favorite dipping oil for bread is a basil/rosemary blend. By pouring this oil in a beautiful bottle, it makes a terrific gift. One word of caution: because oil can be a breeding ground for all sorts of bacteria, you should store the oil in the refrigerator and use within a week.

BASIL/ROSEMARY OLIVE OIL

1-cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 cup loosely packed basil leaves, cleaned and dried
2 sprigs rosemary, cleaned and dried

Place basil leaves and rosemary sprigs in small bottle. Pour extra-virgin olive oil over. Completely cover leaves with oil, adding more if necessary. Cover bottle and refrigerate for at least 4 hours. Strain oil into decorative bottle. Keep flavored oil refrigerated and use within a week. Delicious as a dipping oil with crusty bread, or drizzled over steamed vegetables. This is also terrific when mixed into mashed potatoes, or mixed with vinegar for an Italian salad dressing.