

Herbs

Herbs add rich, fresh flavor to any food in addition to providing enjoyable scents and understated flowers. For the novice gardener, herbs are the easiest way to bring the garden harvest to the dinner table. Because herbs are used in small quantities, only a few plants are needed to provide for an entire season.

The ornamental value of herbs makes them a wonderful addition to flower beds, borders, rock gardens, and corner plantings. Some herbs are annuals, while others are perennial and come up year after year. It's important to recognize if an herb will perennialize as you may want to place it in the flower bed instead of in your vegetable garden or patio pot.

Many gardeners establish a small herb garden near the back door. Generally, a 6- to 10-foot square or rectangular area is sufficient, but you also can use circular or free-form designs. If you haven't heard of it yet, look at herb spirals as a space efficient, water-wise herb garden. Window sill herb gardeners are also gaining in popularity. These small gardens bring a touch of green and freshness to your kitchen in winter months.

Care for the herb garden is similar to that of a vegetable or flower garden. Select a sunny well-drained location, apply a balanced fertilizer, but avoid excessive use of nitrogen fertilizers. Water as necessary during dry periods. Generally, you will need about an inch of water per week, if not supplied by natural rainfall. Mulch will help conserve soil moisture and reduce weed growth as well. Don't mulch too closely to the plants as this can encourage some insect feeding. Instead, leave a ring of 2-3 inches of bare soil just around the plant. Mints (spearmint, peppermint, chocolate mint) prefer moist soil and require more frequent watering.

Harvesting herbs consists primarily of pinching off leaves and small portions of stem as you need them. Many herbs such as basil, benefit from regular pinching to maintain a better shape. Never remove all the leaves from any one plant.

For the novice herb gardener, begin with your favorites. If you use thyme on your Thanksgiving turkey, start with a pot in your window sill. If you regularly make guacamole, cilantro may be all you need. As with vegetables, grow what you'll eat! Unlike most vegetables however, you may also include a few for fun and looks. I enjoy having lavender in my garden just to smell from time to time and my purple basil generally goes undisturbed, I just couldn't resist the color!

If you don't know where to start, or are looking to add a classic to your growing garden, below are a some of the more popular herbs grown in Kansas.

- Cilantro is an annual that can be directly seeded in full sun. Cilantro keeps its flavor best in cooler seasons as it tends to bolt in hot summer weather. Bolting (rapid growth that results in onset of seeds) can be an issue if you have only one plant but if you spread planting out throughout the season it becomes less of an issue. With this schedule, as one plant bolts the next is coming into production. The plants that do bolt and produce seeds can be harvested as coriander.
- Chives are a great option for the kitchen herb garden. As part of the onion family, a little bit of chives goes a long way in omelets and sauces. Cut chives leaves straight across and enjoy their

grass-like appearance. Try to leave at least 2 inches of leaves below your cut and wait for the plant to grow another 2 inches before you harvest again.

- Basil is a fast growing annual that can be started from seed indoors in early April. Basil prefers a protected, sunny area to grow in. Along with traditional Italian basil (such as Genovese) basil also comes in lemon, Thai and purple varieties. Each has a distinctly different flavor and purpose. Don't be afraid to buy one of each and experiment with basil in curries, teas and salad dressings!
- Rosemary is a perennial shrub with a calming scent. Rosemary is an herb not only useful for cooking but also for aromatherapy. Rosemary prefers a sunny location but doesn't tolerate wet feet so make sure your garden drains well.
- Mint is a vigorous perennial in Kansas. Peppermint, spearmint and others in the mint family will take over a garden if given the opportunity. I always plant mint in containers because the pots fill out quickly and I never have to worry about the plants overtaking my garden! Plants prefer rich, moist soil and at least 8 inches to spread. Although mint can be a challenge to contain, it makes a tangy addition to summer drinks, jams and sauces!
- Thyme and oregano will both perennialize and spread in your garden. In the herb spiral in my yard, I like to tuck thyme and oregano in between the rocks of the upper layer. This allows the plants to trail down the rocks, saving space and adding a nice texture to the garden.
- Sage is a drought tolerant and fairly cold-tolerant medium shrub. Sage prefers full sun and will spread readily.

If efficiency in the herb garden is your goal, flowers should be removed to encourage more leaf growth. Many times, well taken care of herbs will produce more leaves than a small household will regularly use. If that is the case for your garden, flowers can add a nice esthetic appeal and may be left on the plant. When harvesting, use leaves on stems without flowers or if that isn't possible, select leaves further down on the stem. Herb flowers are generally edible, but aren't as strong flavored as the leaves, and have an odd texture unless finely chopped.