

Growing Herbs Outdoors

Herbs are some of the easiest plants to grow because they tolerate a variety of soil types and have relatively few insect and disease pests. Herbs can be incorporated into any garden, planted in spaces between shrubs and trees, or be grown formally in a garden of their own.

Site Selection & Preparation

Exposure

Select the herbs to be grown based on the light exposure of the site they will be planted in. This information can be found on seed packets or plant labels. For example, chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*) grows best in full shade, thyme (*Thymus* spp) will grow well in partial shade to full sun, and sage (*Salvia officinalis*) grows best in full sun.

Soil Preparation

It is best to plant herbs in soil with good drainage. If water remains pooled on the top of the soil several hours after watering or a rain event, then the soil



drainage is poor and should be amended to improve water infiltration. To correct this problem, remove the top 12 inches of soil from the area that will be planted in the early spring prior to planting. Mix peat, horticultural sand, vermiculite, and/or compost in with the soil, backfill the area, and then level the soil. This is also a good time to remove any weeds from the soil. Removing the entire weed, including the roots, will prevent weeds from vegetatively propagating.

Planting

Seeds & Transplants

Herbs should be planted based on the recommendations on the seed packet or plant label. Seeds and transplants are commonly purchased at garden centers. When purchasing transplants, pick plants free of insect and disease pests and that look healthy. It is difficult to impossible to improve plant quality. Often, you can find a wider variety of seeds and transplants through plant companies than garden centers. Plant companies can be readily found online. The following companies are highlighted because they offer a wide variety of herbs, and orders can be completed by the telephone, mail, or online.

Richter's Herbs **Goodwood, Ontario** LOC 1A0
Canada 1-905-640-6677 www.richters.com

Johnny's Selected Seeds **184 Foss Hill Road** Albion,
ME 049101-207-437-4395 www.johnnyseeds.com

Territorial Seed Company **PO Box 158** Cottage
Grove, OR 974241-541-942-9547 www.territorial-seed.com

Seeds of Change **PO Box 15700** Santa Fe, NM
875061-888-762-7333 www.seedsofchange.com

White Flower Farm 30 Irene St Torrington, CT
067901-800-503-9624 www.whiteflowerfarm.com

Versey's Seeds PO Box 9000 Charlottetown, PE,
Canada, C1A 8K61-800-363-7333 www.Verseys.com

It is important to note that some herbs do not transplant well and should be directly sown from seed. These include anise (*Pimpinella anisum*), chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*), dill (*Anethum graveolens*), cilantro/coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*), cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*), parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), caraway (*Carum carvi*), and borage (*Borago officinalis*).

Plant Spacing & Labeling

When planting, space herbs according to the recommendations on seed packets or plant labels. Proper spacing will facilitate optimal plant growth. Avoid overcrowding because it can lead to favorable environments for insect and disease pests. Label the herbs individually or at the end of a row as a reminder of what was planted. A good trick is to cover the seed packet with plastic (plastic wrap or baggies work well) and staple it to a wooden stake or use the ready-made plant label that came with the purchased plant.

Irrigation & Fertilization

In general, herbs do not require large amounts of fertilizer and will lose flavor when over-fertilized. Fertilization should be based on soil-test recommendations. Stop fertilizing perennial plants when fall temperatures are around freezing. Fertilizing promotes plant growth, which can make the plant vulnerable to damage or death from cold winter temperatures.

Check soil moisture using a trowel, moisture meter, or your fingers, and irrigate when the soil is dry a few inches below ground. When needed, irrigate until the top 6 to 8 inches of the soil are moist. Avoid over-irrigation, as herb flavor may be negatively affected.

Additional Care for Perennial Herbs

Division

Several perennial herbs will benefit from division including: tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*), sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), oregano (*Origanum* spp.), chives (*Allium* spp.), lovage (*Levisticum* spp.), mints (*Mentha* spp.), lavender (*Lavandula* spp.), and thyme (*Thymus* spp.). Divide herbs in early spring or fall when the plant becomes too large or the center dies, usually every two to four years. Use a shovel to cut the plant into sections taking as much root as possible. Sections can be replanted in new locations. Be sure to water the sections after replanting

to aid in establishment. The woody or dead center of the plant can be removed and placed in a compost pile.

Winter Protection

The cold temperatures of winter may damage or kill some perennial herbs. Mulching at least 4 inches deep at the base of the plant can increase soil temperatures enough to prevent cold damage to the herb roots. Good sources of mulch include bark chips, straw, and leaves.

Sources

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Kowalchik, C. and Hylton, W.H. (Eds.) 1987. Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs. Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA.

Lubbermann, M. 1994. Pay dirt: How to Raise Herbs and Produce for Serious Cash. Prima Publishing, Rocklin, CA.

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