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A Simple Guide to Herb Gardening

Spring is the perfect time to plant a few herbs that not only brighten a landscape, but give fresh flavors to foods.

Some herbs are best grown in the cool of spring and fall, while others thrive once temperatures warm. Herbs such as chives, cilantro, dill, and parsley actually prefer cooler temperatures. Basil, oregano, rosemary and thyme thrive in warm weather. A special herb garden is not required; simply add them to existing landscape plantings or grow them in containers.

Cool-season herbs

Chives grow in small mounds and look lovely in an outdoor container or a perennial garden. The grass-like hollow leaves of onion chives have a mild flavor and may be used fresh in salads and dips. The flowers are edible and can be used in flower arrangements.

Garlic chive, known for its garlic flavor, has flat leaves and fragrant white flowers. It may also be used as a culinary herb or as an ornamental. Harvest chives by snipping leaves at the base of the plant. Cut flower stalks off at the soil line. This will prevent the plant from forming seed and keep it more productive.

Cilantro is an easily grown annual that is used for both its fresh young greens and for its seeds. The heat of summer causes it to bolt - flower and go to seed. The seeds are called coriander. Grow in full sun to part shade in rich, well-drained soil. Grow cilantro from seed, sowing seeds every few weeks to have a steady supply of young leaves.

Dill is easily grown from seed sown in early spring and once it flowers, it will go to seed with the onset of hot weather. Feathery young leaves are used in salads and with vegetables and fish. The ripe seeds and unripe seed heads are used in pickling.

The curly varieties of parsley make nice additions to existing garden beds, planted at the feet of roses or used as a border. Or grow Italian flat-leaf parsley, which has a sweeter flavor and is excellent for cooking.

Sun-loving herbs

Basil is one of the easiest annual herbs to grow. Plant seeds or set out plants in the spring after the last frost, in full sun and rich, well-drained soil. Harvest leaves frequently to prevent blooming, which reduces flavor. Basil is quite tender and will die with the first fall frost. Several species and many cultivars are available.

Oregano, a hardy perennial, does well in containers. It grows to two feet tall, with small rounded leaves and pale pink flowers. Plant it in full sun and well-drained soil. Use oregano to season

meats, stews, soups, spaghetti sauce and pizza. Unlike most herbs, the leaves are best used dried.

Adding textural interest to herb gardens and perennial flower borders, rosemary can be harvested at any time. A shrub that comes in many forms from bushes four feet tall or more to low-growing groundcovers, it grows best in dry sunny areas. Two reliably hardy varieties are "Arp" and "Hill Hardy."

Thyme is a useful herb in a range of flavors and forms. The plants are generally low growing, from virtually flat to the ground to a little over a foot tall. In general, the taller growing species and those with smooth leaves will tolerate Texas heat and humidity better than low growing or wooly types. Thyme should be planted in very well drained soil that stays dry.

Herb-growing tips

Excellent drainage is the key to successful herb growing. Raised beds are ideal. Amend them generously with compost and cover the soil surface with mulch after planting. Most herbs require direct sun -- at least six to eight hours a day.

Harvest herbs frequently and regularly, being careful not to deplete all of the plant's foliage. Generally, take no more than one-third of the foliage at any one time.

We plant herbs for an impressive display that's fragrant and tastes good, too.

Source: Charla Anthony, The Eagle News

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