

Ten Best Herbs to Grow

1. **Basil, recommended: Purple Basil:** Is there a better flavor in the summer than fresh basil, tomato slices, fresh mozzarella and basil leaves, drizzled with a bit of balsamic vinegar? I can't imagine it. But the plant can get rather tall and large leafed so I turned to smaller colored varieties, and for sheer beauty I always recommend the darker purple varieties. You get all the smell and flavor of Sweet Basil and can be used anywhere basil is, but you also get the versatility for making vinegar that is rich red like burgundy wine and flower arrangements with this color rich plant. The purple crinkly leaves look smashing in a salad. Even specialty basil (*Ocimum Basilicum* 'Opal' or 'Purple ruffles'), are easy to grow.
2. **Dill, recommended Fernleaf:** The joy of dill rests in its beauty, aroma, flavor and gardener-friendly growing habits. You can plant it in the early spring with your first lettuces, and watch it bloom into beautiful umbrellas at summer's end. And if you leave them be, those seed heads seem perfectly designed to catch the first snows of winter and arrange themselves artfully even after every green, growing thing has turned brown and called it a wrap. Of course to do that you need to seed a crop about once every two weeks or everything will go to seed in July when it gets hot and nothing will be left in fall. Fernleaf Dill (*Anethum graveolens*) is a smaller version of traditional dill which makes it better in containers. It has all the same culinary uses including fish, salads and omelets.
3. **Thyme, recommended Lemon Thyme:** Thyme is found in cuisines around the world and has been a part of the human experience for thousands of years, allegedly propagated by the Romans in their march to annex the world. It likes growing in sunny, well-drained and even somewhat inhospitable locations and tastes like nothing else in the world. It likes to stew a bit before it lets go of its flavor, so, unlike many herbs, it's OK to throw it in at the beginning of a soup rather than adding it as a last flourish. It also has sweet little flowers that come in different shades depending on the variety you choose. I prefer lemon (*Thymus citriodorus*) and variegated lemon (*Thymus citriodorus variegata*) because they give me thyme's richness as well as a hint of lemon you can use in cooking wherever anything lemon is called for. It is so good when grilling chicken. This little herb can add depth of flavor to meat, chicken and egg dishes. It's also great fresh or dry. Add a pinch to stews and soups for a stronger and more complex stock.
4. **Chives, recommend both regular and Garlic Chives:** Chives are easy to grow, bloom once a season and make a grass-looking succulent evergreen plant that my cats love to nibble on. I use Chives' spring blossoms to make an onion-flavor vinegar and in the fall use the Garlic Chive blossoms (white) to make a garlic-flavored vinegar. These two plants (*Allium schoenoprasum* – regular; *Allium tuberosum* - garlic) will give you the flavor of onion and garlic without the need to grow onion and garlic sets and the need for the perfect sandy soil those sets require. They also give a more subtle sweet flavor you can use uncooked which is not always possible with raw garlic. A colorful and easy way to get a little garlicky and oniony goodness into salads, potato or egg dishes. Once you've tried them snipped fresh, you'll never resort to tasteless dried chives again.
5. **Scented Geraniums:** Not to be confused with the decorative varieties, these plants are in the Pelargonium family. The focus here is on the leaves which provide a powerful scent and come in varieties as vast as the imagination. You can get Chocolate, Mint, Rose, Lemon (of course) and sometimes combinations of two. One of my favorites is Rober's Lemon Rose (Pelargonium cv.) The soft fuzzy indented leaves are a bright green and when you just bump them they release their scent into the air. I keep them in pots on my patio for aroma therapy and along the walkway into and out of the house to welcome me and my guests.

6. **Sage, recommended Tri-color Sage:** Although this is a pungent herb not all enjoy, I cannot imagine gardening without it. Tri-color sage has three colors irregularly patterned on the leaves, a green, a creamy yellow and a rich purple. The habit of Tri-color Sage is more compact than garden sage and it can be grown in a container. Sage oil, which I make on an as needed basis in the summer is great to marinate and baste grilled meats and vegetables. Tri-color (*Salvia officinalis* 'Tri-color') has a gentler flavor and a smaller growing habit, plus it is pretty. Since I never allow my herbs to flower (takes away from the flavor) I enjoy the various variegated and colored herbal varieties to give me unique focal points in my garden. Most commonly used in holiday stuffing, sage is a tasty herb to take advantage of all year long. Great in egg, fowl and vegetable medleys, a little sage goes a long way, so use restraint. It is perfect on poultry. It also makes a pretty garish and dries well in arrangements.
7. **Flat Parsley:** Flat parsley is in a different flavor class than traditional curly parsley, and the most popular ingredient in some of my favorite Italian dishes, it is also high in vitamins. My pasta in the summertime is more an excuse to serve parsley than a reason to eat noodles. With a gentle fresh taste you can make a Parsley Pesto and enjoy it every single day. *Petroselinum neapolitanum* is the scientific name, so make sure you get what you wanted. The best stocks and sauces use many ingredients to create deep flavor. Parsley is an herb that works great with basic stock ingredients, like onions, celery and carrots. Add a little parsley to your favorite stovetop meals just before serving and you'll see a garden fresh difference. Parsley also enhances other herb flavors.
8. **French Tarragon:** This herb has a little licorice-y underflavor, but an inviting aroma that is central to good French cuisine. Making vinegar from the fresh leaves gives you access to its unique flavor even in winter. A word of caution: Some nurseries don't know the distinction between French tarragon (*Artemisia dracuncululus* L.) and Russian tarragon (*A. dracunculoides* L.), a weedy and not wonderful plant with resinous flavor. You need to start French tarragon from cuttings or live plants, as it's very difficult to start from seed. Tarragon can transform fowl into a feast. For the best results, use fresh French tarragon. Make a marinade of tarragon, Dijon mustard, white wine and pepper. It'll enliven your chicken and wake up your taste buds.
9. **Rosemary, recommended Prostrate:** This evergreen shrub has a robust piney flavor and comes in many varieties. ARP and Musted are sold most in the Midwest because of a better ability to withstand our winters, but it still needs to be brought in or heavily sheltered each winter. I like the prostrate or creeping varieties (*Rosemarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus') because I can train them in a standard as a Christmas tree or put in hanging baskets. The flavor of fresh rosemary is so much less strident than dried, so try fresh to see the sweeter gentler side of this wonderful cooking herb. A must for lamb, rosemary is also a tasty accompaniment to potato dishes and strongly flavored meats. If you want to wake up your grilling, add a little fresh rosemary to the heating coals or use rosemary stems as kabob skewers.
10. **Lemon Verbena:** This little known and often ignored herb has many qualities that I want to bring to your attention. *Aloysia Triphyiia* is a deciduous shrub native to South and Central America. In Guatemala I stood next to a plant 3 to 4 feet taller than me, but here in Illinois I've never gotten more than 2 feet of height. However the flavor and scent of lemon these plants have is marvelous and unlike so many herbs, the dried leaves will keep that scent for years and years. You can cook with it, make iced and hot tea with it and use it in bath items as well. The tea is known to be mildly sedative. It is prone to spider mites, so check it carefully when bringing home a nursery plant. A quick spray of chive vinegar will eliminate a mild infestation.

6 EASY STEPS TO GROWING HERBS FROM SEEDS

1. **Preparation:** Start with a string of fluorescent shop lights -- we don't get enough sunshine to support those charming windowsill gardens you see in other climes. Add a shelf long enough to accommodate the light, a space that will stay 65-70 degrees, clean potting containers, a seed-starting soil mix, trays to hold the pots and plant heating pads. You'll also want good air circulation, so get a clip-on fan if needed. Be creative. Any container that has holes in the bottom for drainage -- even an egg carton -- can be used as a pot; a cookie sheet can be your tray. Shop lights come with chains and S hooks for hanging, but you can also prop them up. Initially lights should be just a couple of inches above the pots, but you'll need to move them up as the plants grow.
2. **Plant:** Fill small pots with seed-starting mix and sow seeds just under the soil, which Hicks says is shallower than typically recommended. She's had better results by not putting too much soil over the seeds.
3. **Water:** Put newly planted pots in a tray with a couple of inches of water. When the soil darkens, lift the pots out of the tray and drain well. Empty water from the tray, put pots back and place the tray atop the heating pad and under the lights. While waiting for the plants to germinate, mist regularly to keep soil at the top of the pot moist to the touch. Don't overwater. Once the plants are up, water from the bottom, but don't let pots sit in standing water.
4. **Grow:** Keep the fluorescent light on 12 to 16 hours a day; use a timer for convenience. Watch for plants to emerge. Look to seed packets for instructions on pinching off new growth; some herbs need more than others.
5. **Prepare outdoor beds and pots:** Select a site or put pots in an area that gets at least six hours of sun a day, has easy access to irrigation and has well-drained soil. If you've got sticky clay soil, add quarter-10 gravel and compost so that roots will drain well in winter. If using pots, make sure they are large enough to accommodate the roots of developed herbs. Use standard potting soil.
6. **Move plants outdoors:** In April it will probably be warm enough to begin getting plants used to the outdoor environment. New plants can't withstand frost, hard rain or wind. Initially allow pots to be outside in a protected sunny area for a couple of hours a day, gradually increasing each day for about a week. If it's a cold night, Hicks advises, pull them back in. When the danger of frost is past and your soil doesn't stay in a ball when you make a fist, you're ready to plant.

12 HERBS TO START FROM SEED

1. **Basil:** 'Swiss Sunset,' best red-leaved variety but 'Red Rubin' does well in Illinois heat. 'Nufar' resists wilt. Basil is an *annual* and more sensitive to cold than other herbs, so delay starting seeds until May and move outside in June. To encourage growth, begin pinching back after it has three sets of leaves.
2. **Chives:** *Perennial*. They grow in clumps and provide edible lilac to rosy-pink, cloverlike blooms. Good for indoor growing or in smaller containers.
3. **Dill:** *self-seeding annual*. This versatile plant can be grown for the leaves (dill weed) or the seeds (dill seed) Sew a new set of seeds every two weeks to keep a constant crop of dill weed and give you plenty of seed for pickling and winter interest.
4. **English lavender:** *Shrubby herb*, easy to grow from seed. Trim back when seedlings reach 2 inches high; keep water off leaves.
5. **Sweet marjoram:** *Perennial*. If you want to grow this from seed, start it before the last frost indoors, then move outdoors when temps are expected to stay above 45 degrees.
6. **Greek oregano:** *Perennial*. Sow the seed directly, but do not cover seed with soil; it needs light to germinate. Sow thinly and grow on the dry side.
7. **Italian (flat) parsley** *Biennial*. Flat-leaf type is the standard for cooking and less soapy tasting than curly types. Remember that the second year it will produce seed, so the leaves you want will turn bitter.
8. **Rosemary:** *Shrubby herb*. It's a bit more challenging to start from seed, but you can improve your luck by scratching the shiny seed coat with an emery board before planting. Rosemary is prone to powdery mildew, so keep in a well ventilated area and don't overwater.
9. **Sage:** *Perennial*. Start this seed indoors before the last frost, but it tends to mildew inside, so move outside soon after sprouting. Wait to start this one until early May.
10. **Borage:** *Annual*. This quick growing herb has large seeds and is great to plant with kids. The lovely purple flowers are edible and can be frozen and candied.
11. **Cilantro:** *self-seeding annual*. A must have for Oriental and Tex Mex recipes, cilantro will give your tacos, salsa and burritos authentic south-of-the-border flavor and flair. The seed is often marked Coriander as that is what the fruit of this plant is called.
12. **Pot Marigold** (*Calendula officinalis*): *annual*. I recommend Pot Marigold because of its pom flowers that have bold colors and start to bloom just when many other plants are getting leggy and less attractive. And the flowers can be used to flavor rice and made face creams for vastly different benefits.

Growing Herbs From Cuttings

Remember to keep your tools sterilized. Even the smallest germs will kill young plants. 9 parts water and 1 part bleach is a perfect solution for cleaning tools.

Make sure your shears are sharp; dull will pinch the branch making rooting more difficult.

Take a cutting from just below the leaf node, making a clean cut without ragged edges. You will need between 2 and 4 inches of new growth with plenty of leaves. Trim off the lower third of leaves from stem. Trim off the cut edge and dip just the cut tip in a ground cinnamon to ward off germs. This stops fungus growth. Don't get it on the stem it will retard roots.

Make a soil mix of 1 part sand and 1 part vermiculite and pack it into plastic, clay or paper pots with drainage holes. Do not use standard planting mix. Wet the mixture and pack it down gently.

Insert the stem about 1 inch into the soil mixture so it stands erect. I use a dibble to make a hole (that is a fancy name for a pointed pencil.)

Cover the pot with a plastic bag to hold moisture. Mist them daily early in day until roots form. Remove the plastic cover every couple of days to keep mold and fungus from forming. (This plastic covering is optional, I rarely use it myself.)

Once roots are established remove gently and transplant cuttings to pots containing regular soil blend and move to a sunny location. You know the roots have formed if you tug gently on the cutting and discover it tugs back. Don't do this for at least 2 weeks for most herbs, 3 weeks for rosemary and up to 6 weeks for bay laurel.

Your plants will take 3 to 5 weeks to get about 3 to 4 inches high. Then you can start pinching them to make them bushier.

Herbal Vinegar

To make herb vinegar, wash and dry your fresh herbs thoroughly then pour warm vinegar, not hot, over them in glass jars. You can use any type of vinegar including distilled. Be sure that the fresh herbs are completely covered by the vinegar. Seal the jar and allow them to sit for a month or at least two weeks to mingle the flavors. Do not allow the herb vinegar access to direct sunlight.

After the herb vinegar has steeped remove the fresh herbs that you used and add new ones for a fresher look for the kitchen or gift giving. If you want to add chili peppers to the herb vinegar, thread them on wooden skewers so that they will stay submerged.

There are no herb vinegar recipes that have strict rules. Use your imagination when pairing fresh herbs to be used in your herbal vinegar. Here are a few that go well together.

Cinnamon Basil and Whole Cloves

Lemon basil, lemon balm or lemon thyme by themselves or combined together

Cinnamon sticks with Whole Cloves, Nutmeg, and Allspice

Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme (no kidding)

Dill seed heads with Peppercorns

Basil, Garlic Chives and Peppercorn

Hot Peppers alone or with Garlic Chives or regular Chives

When you start to use your herb vinegar, as the level of the liquid goes down take out any of the herbs that are exposed to the air in the jar. If you leave them in the jar they may form a mold. Never use metal tops on the jars, they will rust from the vinegar.

Herb Shallot Marinade - Tenderizes less expensive cuts of meat. Marinade chicken breasts 3 to 4 hours or overnight, then cook.

- 3/4 cup oil (olive)
- 3/4 cup of any Herbal Vinegar
- 3 Tbls. shallots, finely chopped
- 1 Tbls. fresh parsley, chopped
- 1 tsp. garlic salt
- 1/2 tsp. ground black pepper

Mix all ingredients in small shallow bowl, beating until well blended.

Herb Salad Dressing

- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 2 Tbls. herb vinegar
- 1/2 tsp. dried oregano
- 1/2 tsp. sugar
- dash salt & pepper

Blend ingredients in covered container and allow 4 hours in refrigerator to meld. Can be used as a dip or thinned with 3 T. of milk for salad dressing.

Crafting a Compound Butter: Mix 1 to 2 Tbls fresh minced herbs into 1 stick of unsalted butter. You can use the butter fresh or roll into a log and freeze for later. Thaw to room temp to cook with or use as a spread.

Sugar conserving and salt curing. This is when leaves of herbs are layered and well-covered in sugar or salt so that they retain more color and texture.

- Sugar conserving: Mint, scented geranium, lavender and fragrant basil are good candidates for sugar conserving. Pour 1/2 inch of sugar into a clean glass or nonreactive container. Place leaves across the surface. Cover completely with a 1/4- to 1/2-inch layer of sugar. Add another layer of herbs, then another layer of sugar. Repeat until all the leaves are covered (or the container is full). Make sure the top layer of sugar completely covers herbs. Seal the container. Store in the refrigerator or a cool spot in your house.
- Salt layering: Done exactly the same way using sea salt or kosher salt instead of sugar. Most herbs will work well, but the savory herbs are the best – basil, oregano, thyme, tarragon, savory, etc.

Herb Drying Rack / Mobile

Here's a step-by-step guide:

Gather Materials:

You'll need an old picture frame, chicken wire or fine mesh screen, staples, clothespins or twine, and your dried herbs.

Prepare the Frame:

Remove the glass and back panel from the picture frame. Cut the chicken wire or screen to fit the frame. You don't want to see it from the front. Staple the wire to the back of the frame, ensuring it's securely attached.

Attach extra hanging hooks:

Screw cup hooks or glue clothes pins to the front of the frame.

Create hangers:

Add a quadpod of twine to the corners of the frame and tie at the center to allow the frame to be hung in any location.

To USE: Gather your herbs, tie them into bundles with string or rubber bands, and then attach them to the wire using clothespins or twine to hang on the hooks..

Drying Time: 4-7 Days: Allow herbs to dry for 4-7 days, or until they are crisp and brittle.

- **Check for Moisture:** Periodically check for moisture and ensure proper ventilation.

Tips for a successful herb drying mobile:

- **Air Flow:** Ensure good airflow around the herb bundles to prevent mold and mildew.
- **Space:** Give each bundle enough space to dry without touching each other.
- **Sunlight:** Avoid direct sunlight, as it can fade the herbs and affect their flavor.
- **Ventilation:** Choose a well-ventilated area to allow moisture to escape.
- **Labeling:** Label each bundle with the herb name for easy identification.
- **Re-purposing:** Consider using upcycled materials like old lampshade frames for a unique and eco-friendly drying rack.