

A COOK'S GARDEN OF HERBS

Vera Strader

Like many Midwesterners, I grew up without fresh cooking herbs. My mother kept a bottle of ground sage for the Thanksgiving turkey dressing, but that was the only herb I recall. Upon moving to California, I discovered a variety of fresh herbs, and soon learned to grow the ones I used most.

Now I keep pots handy near the kitchen door ready for a quick snip or two. Many herbs are also quite attractive in the border or vegetable garden. Young nursery plants can be purchased in the spring and several are easily grown from seed.

I would be hard pressed to cook without fresh BASIL. My favorite seed catalog offers 'Deep Purple' and 'Siam Queen' plus eight other varieties; the more common 'Sweet Basil' is our top pick. Basil is a cold-sensitive annual that must be replanted each spring or overwintered in a warm, sunny window. I start numerous seedlings indoors on a heat mat or other source of warmth, and then transplant several into each of two larger outdoor pots. Pinch off flower heads as they form.

As autumn cold approaches, try cutting basil, pureeing the leaves in olive oil, and freezing on flat sheets of plastic wrap. You can then break off pieces for winter soups and sauces.

PARSLEY is a biennial started and grown in the same way as basil, though just a plant or two may do the job. The flat leaf variety is believed to be more flavorful, and curly leaf parsley makes a more attractive garnish. Parsley may live over a second year but is best started anew each year.

ROSEMARY is a tough perennial that comes in a multitude of deer-resistant selections from low-growing ground covers to upright varieties that grow to five, even six feet tall. Two plants grace the entry to our garage, chosen for their winter cold, heat, sun, and drought resistance. They soldier on through blistering summers and winter deluges, always available for fragrant sprigs to season the roast or sauce.

CHIVES are an onion relative that grows in one-foot clumps with narrow, green leaves. Use the rosy-purple blossoms for a garnish or to top salads. Grow its taller relative, garlic chives for its distinctly garlicky-flavored leaves. Its blossoms too are edible, as are the lively-flavored unopened buds. Pop one or two in your mouth as you go by for a zesty snack.

THYME is another cold and drought-resistant herb. English thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) grows about one foot tall with tiny leaves and makes a nice potted plant. Other thyme selections such as silver, lemon, orange or lime and those with variegated leaves are more ornamental, but may be less hardy.

OREGANO is a must for Greek and Italian cooking. Selections of one to two-feet-tall *Oregano vulgare* are the best for culinary use. Choose one that has a fragrance and flavor that you like.

SAGE comes in countless attention-getting ornamental forms, but for cooking look for one-to-two foot-tall garden sage, *Salvia officinalis*. Some have colorful or variegated leaves, and all require good drainage.

MINT comes in a delightful selection of flavors including spearmint; grow in pots to corral its roaming roots.

In general, herbs need six to eight hours of sun a day, and like almost all plants, underwatering or overwatering can be fatal.

University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Vera Strader of Tuolumne County loves gardening and uses potted herbs to make cooking quicker and easier.