

## Herbs – Useful and Beautiful

A pot of herbs makes an excellent present. Even someone without a garden can tuck a pot on a windowsill or balcony or set it as a feature on a table. A group can make a lovely wedding present – one such grouping selected at our nursery recently was a golden oregano, an olive herb and a lemon thyme – garden harmony which will give and give, adding flavour and aroma to life.

The broad definition of a herb is ‘any plant with leaves, seeds or flowers used for flavouring, food, medicine or perfume’. Herbs can be grown anywhere in your garden and do not have to be treated as separate from plantings for beauty or general vegetable gardening. Creating a special herb garden, however, can have practical advantages, since your herbs can be readily located and cared for. Your herb garden could be a group of pots, a formal garden with edges, plants tucked in to spaces between pavers, a herb spiral, or a formal decorative pattern with contrasting foliage.

Herbs can be broadly divided into three groups to help with planting and care. There are those that like full sun and fairly dry Mediterranean style climates (thyme, sage, rosemary, lavender, olive herb), those that need vegetable garden type conditions of sun and regular watering (chives, sweet basil, parsley, coriander), and mints, which prefer at least part shade and a moist environment. Mints need to be contained because they spread rampantly. Comfrey is a handy herb which assists composting and can be made into a valuable liquid fertiliser, but it also spreads and is best in a pot. If it becomes a large clump in the garden, it is very difficult to remove.

Many herbs, such as thyme, oregano and rosemary are perennials and last for years. Parsley is biennial and runs to seed in the second year. Some herbs, such as sweet basil, are not winter hardy and have to be protected and brought inside or replanted each year. Other herbs, such as pineapple sage, die back in winter in cooler areas, but revive once the weather warms up. Tidy them up by cutting back straggly dead growth once the chance of frosts is over.

Too much fertiliser will promote excessive leaf growth at the expense of flavour for Mediterranean needs herbs. Just add some compost which the worms will work down over time, feeding the plants and improving the water holding and draining capacity of the soil. Mulch the garden with organic material to shade it and retain water. As the mulch rots, it will improve the structure of the soil.

Harvesting regularly keeps herbs bushy and in good shape but don't overdo it. Dry herbs or store them for later use in bags in the freezer, or in ice blocks. Always check that information about culinary, medicinal and cosmetic uses of herbs comes from a reputable source.

The flowers on herbs are amongst the most beautiful in our garden and bring plenty of bees. Herbs can be grown for use, foliage beauty or flowers, with those used for the pot best placed close to the kitchen. They are easy to grow and a make a great addition to every household.

Happy gardening!

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