

HERBS IN URBAN GARDENS

By Fred Rosentiel

The word "herb" is derived from the latin herba, a small plant. The "h" may be pronounced at will. Gradually the English word herb became confined to mostly non-woody plants with aromatic, medicinal and culinary uses. Not only do modern medicine and today's perfuming industry and culinary arts still use many of the herbs known since the dawn of civilization, but recently they have assumed even greater importance for persons on salt-free diets.

In the big city, herb gardens are becoming more popular because of their modest demand on space and labor; most of them are not particular as to soil requirements except the almost universal two conditions of perfect drainage and profusion of sunlight. Urban community gardeners will find that these plants can prove to be lucrative at end-of-season fund-raising events – whether potting them for kitchen use, or drying the leaves for potpourri, sachets, and toys.

ANNUALS AND BIENNIALS (*of easy culture)

* Basil, Ocimum basilicum; 15-24 inches; germination 4 days; sow simultaneously with peppers and tomatoes indoors at the end of March for midsummer crop; sow September crop outdoors in June; thin and transplant to 9" apart; pinch new growth; in October dig up plants for sunny kitchen windows; for strongest flavor harvest basil just before it blooms; can be easily potted up in fall for kitchen use in winter; use fresh or dried leaves in all tomato dishes – soups, sauces, salads; repels fruit flies but may attract Japanese beetles unless dusted with lime.

* Borage, Borago officinalis; 2 ft; sow seeds thinly outdoors in early spring; likes deep soil; thin to 1 ft. apart; self sows readily providing superior plants; has blue, star-shaped blossoms; leaves can be candied for decorating cakes or chopped fine to give a cucumber flavor to salads and cool drinks.

Caraway, Carum carvi; 2½ ft; biennial; sow in September in furrows; thin to 6" apart when the first year winter hardy carrot – like leaves develop; the second year white umbels bloom in May and the plants die after the seeds ripen; can tolerate partial shade; scald seeds with boiling water before drying; use with sauerkraut and cooked beets.

Chervil, Anthriscus cerefolium; 2 ft. germination 7 days; called "poor man's tarragon"; fresh seed is best sown in early September; requires partial shade in summer; excellent window-still plant; leaves are collected until the ground freezes hard; use fresh or frozen leaves in omelets or salads.

*Coriander, Coriandrum sativum; 2-3 ft; germination 14 days; sow outdoors in early spring; several sowings will provide a succession of blossoms and seeds; crushed seeds used in bread, cookies and meat loaf.

*Dill, Anethum graveolens; 3 ft; germination 7 days; scatter seed thinly on freshly turned soil or in shallow drills in early spring; DO NOT PLANT NEXT TO FENNEL; will self sow in undisturbed soil; leaves must be picked when the plant is still quite young; a "must" for all fish and lamb dishes.

Fennel, Foeniculum vulgare; 5 ft; germination 2 weeks; likes rich, well-drained soil; best planted in July at the back of the border where it can be stakes; DO NOT PLANT NEXT TO DILL: can be harvested until late fall; mince the fresh leaves over salads, potatoes and fish.

Parsley, Italian, Petroselinum hortense filicinum; 2 ft; germination 4 – 6 weeks; seeds should be soaked in warm water before planting outdoors in the early spring; thin seedlings to 3" apart; likes cold weather and tolerates more shade than most herbs; prefers a rich, well – drained loam with lots of humus; start in August for window gardens in the winter; wash leaves frequently with water to discourage insects; is the only leafy herb that can be dried for 5 minutes in a 400 degree oven; can also be dried in a week in an open dish in the refrigerator; has 3 times as much Vitamin C as oranges, weight for weight, plus much Vitamin A and iron; can be cooked for its pleasant flavor as well as lending flavor o salads, soups, stews.

* Pennyroyal, Hedeoma pulegioides; 1 ft; when sown in the garden it self sows easily; tolerates dry conditions; makes a pleasant tea; repels mosquitoes and flies when leaves are rubbed on the skin.

*Summer Savory, Satureja hortensis; 18 inches; germination 10 days; successive sowings from early spring; thin to 4-6 inches apart; self sows readily, use leaves fresh or dries with string beans, poultry, white fist, meat loaf and chicken soup.

PERENNIALS (*of easy culture)

Balm, Lemon, Melissa officinalis; 2 ft; sow in early spring in full sun or partial shade; divide clumps in early April; start new plants from runners which appear after flowering; use fresh or frozen leaves in iced tea, preserved pears, and fruit cups; will deter cats from upholstered furniture.

Berggamot, or Bee Balm, Monarda didyma; 3 ft; spreads rapidly in good soil; lift clumps in spring and set runners in a new spot; mulch with compost in the fall; the only herb with brilliant red flowers; used dried for pot pourri or for flavoring in fruit cups or preserves.

*Burnet, Salad, Sanguisorba minor; 18 inches; germination 10 days; sow seeds in a dry sunny spot; does not need rich soil; excellent edging for vegetable garden; fresh leaves can be snipped into salad greens for a cucumber-like flavor; the first-year plants can be treated as annuals and make a good edging for the vegetable plot.

*Catnip, Nepeta cataria; 3 ft; can be sown in early spring or in September; self sows readily; survives very dry summers; plants pruned short last better through the winter; can tolerate partial shade; dry leaves for tea or to use in catnip toys; steep fresh leaves in water to use as an insect repellent; also said to repel rats.

Chamomile, Roman, Anthemis nobilis; 1 ft; apple-scented ground cover plant that in mild weather can be grown as an evergreen lawn; spreads when trodden on; must be kept well-weeded; sow seeds in April on sunny site in well-drained soil mixed with peat moss; to keep evergreen in a cold winter cover with salt hay; can be brewed in to a bitter-tasting "Peter Rabbit Tea"; an infusion is stimulative in bath water and is used to brighten blond hair.

Chives, Allium schoenoprasum; 12 inches; for harvest the next season, sow in March or August in shallow drills; drills should be well marked to prevent the young shoots being confused with weedy sprigs of grass; sunny location and fertile soil necessary – especially so in a window box; to preserve the plant's strength no part should ever be shorn bare but odd side shoots can be cut out; fertilize occasionally; make beautiful edging plants displaying their mauve flowers in May; universally used fresh or frozen with cream cheese and vegetables and in soups and salads.

*Horehound, Marrubium vulgare; 2 ft; sow in early spring or early fall in hot dry poor soil where it self sows readily; very drought resistant; horehound candy is good for coughs.

Lavender, Lavandula vera; 2½ ft; germination 6 weeks; sow in flats filled with potting soil and topped with a ½ inch layer of clean sand – do not overwater; young plants require mulching after ground is frozen for the first winter; prefers humusy soul with addition of limestone; flowers can be harvested I second year, preferably just before they open, and dried for use in sachets and pot pourris.

*Lovage, Levisticum officinale; 6 – 8 ft; sow in 3 – 4 inch peat pots in early spring; set plants outdoors in late March about 3 – 4 ft. apart in full sun in the back of the herb bed; needs rich well – drained soul; leaves are used as a celery – like seasoning for salads, meat loaf, sorrel soup, fish sauces roast chicken and turkey salad; leaves can be frozen or dried and used for poultry dressing; seeds can be used as a substitute for celery seed in any recipe; pinch off the flowers as they appear in midsummer if many leaves are desired.

THE CITY LOT

*Marjoram, Sweet, Majorana hortensis; 12 inches; germination 12 days; best sown indoors in the spring in a sterile medium such as sphagnum moss or sand over garden soil to prevent damping off fungus; transplant seedlings when they have four leaves, and harden off before planting out in a wind – free location; cut severely as the first buds appear and clip leaves for drying; enhances the flavor of many foods: roast lamb, egg dishes, macaroni and cheese, pea soup, baked fish, green salads and omelets.

*Rue, Ruta graveolens; 2½ ft' started easily from seed in gravelly soil in early spring or late summer or indoors in late winter; should stand 10 inches apart in full sun and be trimmed the first year to render them more bushy; row of wide, pruned rue plants will form a good low hedge with blue – green leaves and yellow flowers; the pungency of the leaves is a reminder that the plant is of the citrus family; can cause dermatitis to sensitive skins in hot weather; exposed areas should be quickly washed with brown soap.

*Sage, Salvia officinalis; 2½ ft; sown in full sun and good soil in early spring the first year plants may bloom in August; set plants 2 ft apart; improve with age when they become small woody shrubs which when divided retain some roots for transplanting; cut back in the early spring when more blue flowering shoots with pungent leaves will grow quickly whereas fall pruning may deprive the plant of too much leaf strength to survive the winter; can be used fresh or dried in poultry dressing and sausage.

Savory, Winter, Satureja montana; 12 inches; germination 14 – 21 days; sow in a cold frame in the fall and pot before being planted in a permanent location for the development of sturdy compact roots; easy to propagate from layered side branches which root easily; winter protection with salt hay or pine needles will prevent frost heaving and keep the leaves green longer; use fresh or dried with green beans, poultry, stew and soup; has attractive pinkish white blooms in August.

Thyme, Thymus vulgaris; 10 inches; germination slow; sow ¼ inch deep outdoors in Spring or indoors in pots; space plant 12 inches apart in full sun in light, well- drained soil; feed with onemeal in Spring and mulch with salt hay over the Winter; can be used fresh or dried in clan chowder, poultry dressing and in sachets and potpourri

Woodruff, Sweet, Aperula odorata; 10 inches; germination about six months; can be divided and replanted when plant covers an area of about 2 square feet; root cuttings in wet sand; set plants 9 – 12 ft apart where they get shade for at least half of the day; dainty white flowers appear in May; harvest leaves before it blooms; use a sprig in white wine with strawberries for a Maibowle; dry leaves for herbal tea or potpourri.

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