



Tucson
Organic
Gardeners

soiling our hands since 1971

Growing Herbs Organically

People choose to grow herbs because of the need for fresh herbs and sometimes because of limited gardening space. Before rushing out to the nearest garden center, consider several factors.

- ä Are culinary herbs the only consideration?
- ä Would herbs be included that traditionally are used to heal?
- ä Do native herbs appeal or have a place in the landscape?
- ä Has the mature size of the herb been investigated?
- ä Is a plot available, or will the plants always live in pots?
- ä Are the plants to be propagated for sale, or are they only for home use?

Visit garden centers and friends who have mature herb plants, study herb magazines, and read herb books. *Sunset Herbs*, an illustrated guide, is published for Western conditions. Make a list of what you want, and what can be grown in Tucson.

With the exception of native herbs, the soil where the herbs are to flourish should be soft, dark and rich. Some culinary herbs need more moisture and less heat than others do. Most native herbs need a dry soil and welcome the sun. If planning formal herb gardens, prepare the bed at least a month before planting. Work the soil in the beds to a foot or more, turning the soil. Then remove the soil, divide it in half and mix compost with the remainder. Add to the soil a small amount of composted manure and compost. Mix well before filling the bed.

The plot you have chosen has never been broken and is hard and dry. Spread gypsum to loosen the particles and allow water to penetrate the hardpan. Water it liberally, let it set for 2 or 3 weeks, watering occasionally. The soil will be easier to dig. After the soil has been removed, layer the bottom of the bed with an inch or so of well-rotted manure. Various kinds of nutrients can be added to the mixture. Use small amounts of soil sulfur to break up heavy soil; kelp or fish meal adds nitrogen and phosphoric acid and potash; soft rock phosphate promotes strong roots and vigorous top growth; and cottonseed meal adds nitrogen, phosphate and potassium.

Choose an irrigation system. Install it before planting seedlings or seeds. Annuals will need regular moisture, but perennials will establish deep roots after the first year. Wind dries the soil quickly, and seeds must be sprinkled with water several times a day or the seeds will not germinate. Young plants are very tender, so seeds should be sown in the early spring. Birds love fresh greens! To avoid stress on seedlings, plant in an evening or on an overcast windless day. Using a row cover will help the young plants survive.

For filling pots, use the same method of mixing soil. Buy the best soil mix available, without forest mulch or peat moss.

Follow the garden center advice when transplanting native plants. A drip system can be established to meet the plants requirements. Pots dry out quickly, and even perennials will need extra moisture. Set several filled pots near each other, making sure the various herbs are compatible.

Plants such as basil and parsley, whose leaves are constantly being removed, need a foliar feed with a good quality fish emulsion every two or three weeks. Also herbs such as basil and the mints will need the flower tips pinched off, so the plant will continue growing new leaves and not go to seed.

Since the leaves and/or flowers are to be eaten, use caution about controlling pests. Herbs have strong scents and are used as companion plants for vegetables, but when they live alone, the pest could destroy the herbs. Some herbs are subject to root rot.

Mediterranean culinary herbs will need afternoon shade, and attention to moisture needs, especially until well established. Dill and fennel are among those herbs that will reseed year after year. Let some

plants flower to attract bees and other beneficial insects. Parsley, dill, fennel, and lemon balm attract bees. Experiment with herbs. Those herbs that would not grow this year might flourish next year. Weather conditions cannot be predicted from year to year. Have fun.

AMISE HYSSOP is known as the honey plant because bees are attracted to the blossoms. The perennial can be started from seed or division. It needs a sunny well-drained spot, fertile soil, and regular moisture to thrive. Leaves can be used either fresh or dried for tea or garnish.

BASIL is a fast-growing annual that can reach two feet high. Prune to keep the plant bushy. Green ruffled leaves, red or purple leaves, and various flavors and scents are available. The leaves can be dried, or frozen for future use. Plant from seed when the ground is warm. It needs well-drained rich soil and compost.

If you have space, plant a **BAY** tree. At maturity it is 40 feet, but can be potted and pruned. Since it prefers moist heat, give it dappled shade. Leaves can be dried and stored for soups and stews or used as insect repellent.

BEE BALM is a native and is known by many names: bergamot, horsemint and Oswago tea are a few. Hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to the flowers. This perennial likes a moist soil and summer shade. Use the orange-flavored leaves fresh or dried in tea and salads.

BORAGE can grow to three feet high and wide. Since the leaves have bristly white hairs, plant it in a corner. Bees love the blue scentless flower. Borage repels insects and diseases in neighboring vegetation. Use the young leaves and the flowers in salads.

BURNET leaves have a cucumber-like taste when picked while young. Cut the flower stems to ensure new leaves. This hardy perennial needs routine water and fertile soil with dappled shade. The lacy clumps reach a foot high and two feet wide, and can be used as ground cover or for borders. Use in salads, iced or hot tea, herb butters, and flavored vinegars.

CHAMOMILE comes in two forms. One, German (*Matricaria recutita*) is a tall annual, 2 to 3 feet high. *chamaemelum nobile*, or Roman, is a short perennial and has a stronger fragrance. Currently it is used as a tea for nerves. The apple scent benefits cucumbers and onions. Both plants like well-prepared soil, to be evenly moist, and shade in the heat.

CHICORY'S bright blue flowers can be added to salads, but close after five hours from opening. The perennial reseeds easily, loves rich soil, but will grow in poor soil with less water. The plant will freeze but the roots remain. Use young tender leaves raw in salads, in cooked vegetables, and stir-fry dishes.

CHIVES are perennials in the desert. It and its cousins onions, garlic and shallots, contain Allicin, a germ killer. Garlic has the most, then onion, and small amounts in the rest. All species help deter aphids, so they can be planted anywhere in the landscape, except among legumes and sage. Use the flowers, fresh or dried, in salads and vinegars. Chop the leaves into egg the plant, or dishes.

CILANTRO'S leaves have a strong sharp flavor, and most pests avoid the plants. The seeds are known as Coriander. The flowers attract pollinators. Keep planting seeds every two or three weeks. The plants grow fast in the heat. Use fresh leaves, not dried. Cilantro has long roots and is compatible with caraway. Too much nitrogen robs the leaves of flavor.

The roots of **COMFREY** grow deeply, but in the desert needs plenty of water and afternoon shade. Plants may die back with frost, but roots remain. Bushy to three feet high, with hairy mineral-rich leaves, which decompose quickly, the plant is not to be eaten. The protein Allantoin, promotes healing to bind cuts and broken bones. Do not drink the tea. Apply as a compress, or use fresh leaves.

DILL has feathery foliage reaching 3 feet high and has a pungent scent when bruised. Sow seeds in full sun at 2-week intervals. It produces seeds the second year of growth. Dill enhances the growth of cabbage, onion and lettuce, but keep away from carrots and tomatoes. Bees will visit the yellow flowers.

FENNEL, a relative of dill, grows taller but has a pleasant licorice scent. When fennel flowers, expect many bees. Fennel roots are toxic to many plants. Sow seeds in a corner where weeds might grow. The plants have deterred rabbits in my garden. Keep away from beans and peppers. Fennel tea is used for colicky babies, to soothe the stomachache, and to regulate appetite.

GARLIC bulbs are grown as annual, in well-drained soil with full sun and regular moisture. Buy a bulb,

separate the cloves, plant base down with roses and other plants that attract aphids. After flowering, leaves turn yellow. Dig with care. Let the bulbs dry. To store, braid the leaves and hang. Elephant garlic has a milder flavor.

LEMON BALM belongs to the mint family, thus it spreads by underground and surface stems. Light shade and moist soil are its two requirements. Beekeepers often have the plant growing near hives. As with mint, cut back the leggy plants for young leaves to grow.

MARJORAM is a mint relative. The leaves and flavor resembles oregano, but has a different aroma. This Mediterranean native likes full sun, well-drained soil and average water requirements. Cut back the twiggy parts to overwinter. "

MINTS thrive in part shade and with regular moisture. The roots can be invasive, causing many people to plant mints in pots. Go lightly with organic matter and manure as these encourage rust. The roots grow rapidly and the plant will get leggy. Mints come in many scents and flavors. Sprinkle fresh mint leaves to drive away mice. Use in iced and hot tea, jelly, vinegars, salads and deserts.

NASTURTIUM flowers brighten winter days, but plants may die in summer's heat. Use both leaves and flowers as the peppery taste adds to salads. The large seeds grow easily. Seedlings do not transplant well. These annuals can vine or grow bushy. Colors range from white to deep orange and double reds. The root system deters some nematodes.

OREGANO can be a low-growing mat or tall bushy plants. Roots spread by underground stems. Dry or freeze the spicy leaf. Oregano prefers a slightly alkaline soil and heat. Plants can be started from seed, from cuttings or from division. The flavor of beans is enhanced when planted near oregano.

PARSLEY clumps make an attractive edging. Its leaves are used in a wide variety of foods, and can be dried or frozen. Good soil with afternoon shade and regular moisture are required.

ROSEMARY has a woody stem that will easily make new plants. The fragrant stiff needle-leaves pierce soft skins of snails and slugs. Use the low-growing variety as a hedge. Soft blue flowers attract bees. Plants can take reflected heat.

SAGE encourages the growth of carrots, cabbage, strawberries, and tomatoes, but not onions. Many varieties are available. The plants like full sun and do not require fertile soil. Water only until mature. Cut back in spring to prevent flowering. Use dried leaves in soups and as an insect repellent in flours and meals.

THYME is of the mint family, but needs well-drained soil, moderate watering, and afternoon shade. All varieties benefit eggplant, potatoes and tomatoes. None grow higher than 15". Cabbage worms and whiteflies are repelled. The fragrant blossoms attract bees.

Many gardeners believe the leaves of **YARROW** increases the essential oils of other herbs. Its flowers attract predatory wasps and lady beetles. The plants thrive in full sun and poor soil, but will produce more flowers in better soil and with moderate moisture. Choose from many varieties.

Of course there are many more herbs. But these are the ones most gardeners can grow with success. Also there are a number of native herbs that are not listed.