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# Growing Herbs in the Desert

## - Mary Sisson Eibs

My first attempts at gardening in the desert were quite traumatic. While volunteering at The Tucson Botanical Gardens as a docent in the herb garden I had the pleasure of working closely with Cecily Gill, who is the gardener in charge of the herbs there. Since then, Cecily has become my "herbal mentor" and my friend and my herb gardens have become more successful. We had tea a short while back and I asked Cecily to help me with an article for those who would like to experiment with herb gardening but who have avoided it in the past for one reason or another. Here are some of her suggestions.

Start with a small garden or a few pots filled with seeds or plants from the herbs which are familiar to you and which you may use in your cooking. Situate your pots or your garden in a sunny location as close to the kitchen as possible so that you can quickly run to the garden and gather needed herbs in time for a meal.

Desert soil must be improved. Herbs will only thrive in poor soil in their native locations. Your soil should be a well draining mixture of soil, compost, and sand. Mark off your area and spread 2 inches of your amendments on top of the area. Dig them in to a depth of 10 to 12 inches. Cecily suggests that you create banks around your herb bed to help retain moisture. If you prefer to use pots avoid using potting soils with a high peat moss content.

Shop for small pots of your favorite herbs in the fall. If you are using pots, start with 4 to 6 large pots and place 1 or 2 plants in each. Seeds should be lightly pressed into the soil and covered gently. Parsley, dill, coriander, and cumin are easily grown from seed. These can be obtained from the bulk food section of health food stores. Avoid disturbing the tap root when planting potted herbs. I try to place my tallest plants, such as lemon grass or sweet basil toward the back of my herb bed. Mints are best grown in pots since they can be extremely invasive.

After you have planted your garden cover the remaining area with an attractive mulch. This will help keep the area below your plants clean and dry and will also aid in water retention. When choosing a decorative mulch for your herb garden Cecily suggests using wood chips for woody herbs such as lavender, rosemary, or thyme. Small stones would be attractive as a mulch for soft perennials such as oregano, burnet, or germander. Put a layer of mulch on top of the soil in your pots as well. Cecily likes to line her beds with decorative rocks. She explains that this helps to define your bed and adds charm to the area.

Cecily believes that change in your herb garden is a positive thing. "Herbs are a very diverse group of plants," she explained. "Don't look for permanence. Not all herbs will thrive under the same conditions." The key is experimentation.