

HERBS

for aroma, for flavor, for romance

By June Santon, master gardener

Growing herbs is all about aroma and taste. It is even a little bit about sound, if you think about the buzzing of bees and the chirping of birds brought to your garden by fragrant herbs.

An herb is just a plant that we like to use for aroma and flavor in foods, or one that makes a substance that has medicinal value. If you'd like to set aside a special space for an herb garden, your best bet is to prepare it just the way you would prepare any other mixed garden. Find a spot that gets several hours of sun every day. Clear the space and dig in lots of compost. If you're planting seeds, cover them with a very thin layer of mulch and water with a fine spray at least once a day until they germinate. If you're planting young seedlings, use a thicker layer of mulch and water often enough to keep the soil slightly damp but not wet.

Try a design other than straight rows. Here's an idea: Surround a birdbath by four squares to form a larger square. Separate the four small squares with two straight graveled paths, forming a cross with the birdbath at the center, where they intersect. A cheerful row of bright orange marigolds could outline the paths, and pansies could outline the larger square.

Flowers like marigold blossoms, pansies and rose petals are edible and make beautiful garnishes. Rose hips are used as an herb tea. I love to sprinkle chive blossoms, pretty little puff-balls the color of amethysts, over a salad. Arugula makes delicate white blossoms with a slight peppery taste. Lavender blossoms have a sweet, perfumey essence and look pretty sprinkled over strawberry shortcake with whipped cream.

You'll choose your own favorite herbs for your garden, of course. Here are some of my favorites:



Chive blossoms are delightful sprinkled over a salad, or as a cheerful bouquet in a vase.

Pineapple sage: Lightly stroke your fingers over a leaf and you're rewarded with a rich, ripe scent exactly as if you'd just sliced open a ripe pineapple. It makes gorgeous, neon-red blossoms that hummingbirds find irresistible.

Loveage: Loveage stems and leaves taste exactly like celery, only stronger. I use celery flavor in all kinds of soups and stews, in rice—you name it. Because of its punch of flavor, I like to use loveage instead of celery.

Chives: Easy to grow, useful in zillions of dishes, with edible flowers pretty enough for a bouquet.

Garlic chives: Similar to chives but the flavor is a mild cross between onion and garlic. It's delicious and adds a note of color sprinkled raw over salads, potatoes and other foods.

Match Your Herbs to Your Soil

CLAY SOILS

Most plants have a hard time in clay soils, but some actually seem to do best in clay, and many others tolerate this

soil type quite well. German chamomile, cilantro and caraway do especially well in clay soils. Angelica, lemon Balm, most varieties of mint, bergamot, chives and garlic chives, fennel, English lavender and sage all tolerate clay soils.

In general, herbs that like a lot of moisture are most likely to take well to clay, because clay soils tend to become waterlogged after heavy rains or as the winter snow melts off.

SANDY SOILS

The majority of herbs do very well in sandy, fast-draining soils. Marjoram, oregano, summer savory and winter savory, rosemary, tarragon and thyme all thrive in sandy soil.

Bay trees, the trees that make bay leaves like you get in those little tin containers, prefer sandy soil. Make sure you get the species *Laurus nobilis*, often called sweet bay, or bay laurel, or culinary bay. Once you've experienced the heady aroma from a fresh-picked bay leaf, that little tin container will never seem the same.

HOT, MOIST CLIMATES

Tropical gardeners do face limits. Some herbs really don't like all that humidity and warmth. Floridians can grow lemon verbena that reaches its full potential, and its full height of 16 feet. But that may also be the only climate where mildew can become a problem for herbs such as summer savory, rosemary and basil. Some herbs, such as sorrel, do much better in cooler temperatures. English lavender doesn't flower well or thrive in high humidity, and scented geraniums are damaged by heavy rainfall. 🌱

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