

Before you dash out to the store for those tongue-tantalizing herbs needed to flavor your favorite holiday dishes, imagine how nice it would be to walk directly into your garden. With a few cultivation guidelines, it is easy to grow herbs in the garden as culinary companions or whimsical plant pairings in ornamental landscapes. Now, while soil temperatures are still warm and ambient temperatures are cooling, with rain on its way, is the best time to put down roots for herb harvests next year.

The term 'herb' comes from the plant type "herbaceous"; these plants grow with fleshy tissues and do not create persistent woody stems. A majority of culinary herbs tend to be herbaceous perennials that tend to last productively for several growing seasons. To have ample amounts of herbs available, plant at least a dozen of each type of perennial. For annuals and biennials, stagger plantings by one or two months to continue to have harvestable material. Propagation of these herbs by seed can be achieved in spring, following the threat of frost, but a lot more time (possibly up to a year or more) is needed to invest for the plant to establish sizably enough to begin harvesting materials.

To reap enormous success in growing herbs, follow these simple cultural requirements: generous sunlight (at least six-hours) and adequate drainage allow herbs to thrive. As is the case with most plants, soil conditions greatly influence plant health. If you have heavy soils, like the expansive clays of San Luis Obispo, silty slopes of Cambria and Morro Bay, or chalky calcareous hillsides of Arroyo Grande, consider augmenting. Create raised beds or mound up your native soil, and amend or import ample sandy-loam to increase drainage for plant roots. Remember to provide adequate irrigation, yet let the soil dry slightly between waterings. A little proactive attention to your soils will pay you in bountiful harvests.

Culinary sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is a perennial and can add an earthy freshness to foods. It is preferable to allow this plant to establish a decent size before harvesting. For best flavor, harvest

leaves slightly before or following flowering. Replant after three to four years. Ornamentally, try using showy varieties such as 'Tricolor,' 'Purpurecence,' and 'Aurea' as superb perennial border plants.

Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) is a salivating companion to stuffing, meats, stews, fish, and game. In the garden, this perennial displays various low varieties lending themselves to super "soft-grout" plantings between flagstones. On a warm day, slight foot-traffic over the thyme-planted flagstones can fill the garden with an aromatically sensuous musk.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is really easy to grow and adds that distinctive seasoning spunk to lamb, potatoes, and many Mediterranean dishes. In the garden, this hardy perennial comes in many applicable forms and shapes. *Rosmarinus* 'Irene' has brilliant blue flowers and grows prostrate as a nice skirting to a specimen shrub, small tree, or mixed border planting. *Rosmarinus* 'Tuscan Blue' is a favorable upright variety, and its coniferous texture lends to a clean and formal home-foundation planting or a small clipped hedge.

Stems and leaves of Savory (*Satureja hortensis*) can blend well with other herbs, vegetable dishes, lentils, eggs, stuffing, and soup mixes. This plant can be mixed into the garden border or raised vegetable bed.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) is slightly more challenging to grow, but worth the extra care for use as a fresh garnish and flavoring. Parsley tends to appreciate regular garden-watering and fertile soil. Though it is a biennial, treat it as an annual and replace it for continued vegetative production.

Whether dried or used fresh, cooking with and cultivating herbs helps us enjoy great holiday food. Happy Holidays!

