

The Outpost Exchange
Herb Gardening
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“There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray you, love, remember.”

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

Herbs and humans have a long and fascinating history together. The same herbs we grow and use today have been planted and harvested for an extraordinarily wide variety of purposes throughout the ages and across cultures. Herbs provide a strong connection to the history of humanity, because, unlike many flowers and vegetables, most herbs have not been hybridized, so the herb you are growing today is essentially the same one that grew thousands of years ago.

The applications for herbs seem endless. These versatile plants have been—and still are today—used to flavor food, make scented jellies, honey and butter, create natural medicines, produce beauty products and dyes, decorate gardens and make crafts that are enjoyable for both their appearance and scent. From rituals and repellents to poetry and perfumes, herbs are indeed multitalented plants.

Rosemary, for instance, is an herb rich in lore and function. In ancient Greece and Rome it was used as the poor man’s frankincense or myrrh-based incense because it was easily harvested from the wild. When burned, a twig of rosemary is said to rid the space of negative energy due to its cleansing vibrations and thus was burned at shrines in ancient Greece to drive away evil spirits and illnesses. There are some beliefs that a fresh twig under your bed brings a good night sleep or, when worn around your neck, preserves your youth. Of course, it’s also believed to attract elves, so sleep with it or wear it at your own risk! Wherever you put it, rosemary rewards you with its fragrance, which is reason enough to plant it in your garden or place it in a wreath. Rosemary is also a culinary staple, lending a refreshing taste to everything from teas and lemonade to marinades and oils.

Rosemary is an herb of remembrance and has been tucked in wedding bouquets and used in funeral ceremonies. In some European countries it is still a custom to carry rosemary in funeral processions and to cast the herb into the grave at the burial ceremony. It was in this context that Shakespeare invoked rosemary in his play *Hamlet*. Many believe the Bard was a gardener, for he plants his prose and poetry with references to more than 180 different herbs and flowers.

*“I know a brook where the wild thyme blows,
Where oslipsis and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine
With sweet musk-roses with eglantine
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night
Lull’d in these flowers with dances and delight.”*

Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Thyme comes from the Mediterranean and was brought to North America with the first colonists as a food preservative and medicine. Thyme contains thymol, which is an antiseptic substance. This made it a good ingredient to keep mummies fresh in ancient

Egypt, to be used as an oil to cleanse wounds through World War I and as a remedy for sore throats. Symbolically, thyme is said to give courage and its aroma is reputed to calm nerves. Of course, it's part of the potpourri of herbs crooned about in Simon and Garfunkel's "Scarborough Faire." It's also a wonderful garden staple because it's easy to grow, smells great and is a primary cooking ingredient.

*"Here's flow'rs for you, These are flow'rs
Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjorum
Of middle summer, and
The marigold, that goes to bed
I think they are given
Wi'th' sun,
To men of middle age.
And with him rises weeping.
Shakespeare's **The Winter's Tale***

Lavender is a Mediterranean plant that was cultivated in ancient times to make perfumes. According to the booklet "10 Essential Herbs for Lifelong Health" by Barbara Heller, M.S.W. (Storey Communications), its name comes from the Latin word *lavare*, which means "to wash" and it has long been a favorite bath scent. Lavender was used in the public bath houses of Rome and as another ingredient in the Egyptian mummification process. It was a favorite of English royalty for their gardens, teas and linens. It's a beautiful addition to any garden, with its scented silvery foliage accented by long flower spikes of varying hues of purple. Used externally, its health claims include combating insomnia, nervousness and headaches as well soothing wounds, burns and skin irritations. It is reputed to have antispasmodic, analgesic, antidepressant and antiseptic qualities and to even have reduced breast cancer tumors in mice.

It was lavender that first hooked Marcia Carmichael of Milwaukee, Wis. on herbs. She was a college student studying abroad in Cambridge, England in the early 1970s when she "fell in love with the hedges of lavender," she recalled in a recent telephone interview. Upon returning to the States, Carmichael "began a quest for lavender." Alas, it was not readily available at that time. But while looking for lavender, she started picking up other herbs and learning about them and has never stopped. She now raises over 500 varieties of herbs and scented geraniums and is unofficially known as The Herb Lady of the West Allis, Wis. Farmer's Market, where she has been selling her herb plants for 22 years (see "resources" sidebar for information on the market). She eventually found the lavender, for she now raises 30 varieties of the plant and it remains a favorite, along with rosemary (she grows 50 varieties) and scented geraniums, which can be used for cooking, fragrance, dyeing, potpourri and more. She pronounces the word "herb" *with* the "h" sound, ala the British and Martha Stewart, but says it's fine for folks to also keep the "h" silent. "The plants don't mind either way," she quipped, "just as long as you talk to them."

One of the joys of herbs for Carmichael is their ability to cross cultures and language and be a means to communicate with other people. "At the West Allis market there is a lot of opportunity to meet people from other cultures and to 'visit', even though we don't speak the same language," she said. "People may see a plant that their grandmother or mother grew in their homeland and, through gestures, we're able to understand each other. Herbs are a great way to make people happy and to connect with them."

As another example, she cites the countless types of themed herb gardens one can plant, such as biblical, Shakespearean, Victorian or medieval. These are gardens that would include the popular plants of that time. Creating such gardens taps into history and different interests,

and can be a means to open dialogue or extend a subject one is studying. Also, herb gardens delight the senses—sight, smell, taste and touch—and therefore appeal to most people on some level. For Carmichael, the fragrance and feel of the plants are her favorite parts. “I do a lot of ‘pet and sniff’,” she laughed. “Growing herbs is a continuous learning process, full of surprises. It’s part of the fun,” she said.

Kate Meyer, who grows herbs as a hobby in the yard of her Glendale, Wis. home, got into herbs because a co-worker gifted some to her more than eight years ago. Thus rooted in the herb world, she began to pick up information and tips from friends, relatives and business acquaintances. “It became a means for dialogue with clients,” she said.

Meyer started attending the annual herb plant and herb fair of The Herb Society of America’s Wisconsin Unit. (See “resources” sidebar for more information.) “Two to three years into attending the plant sale I started discovering the various varieties of herbs and seeing the products that people make with them—scented honey, scented jellies, all kinds of things. It’s fun to see what can be created with herbs.” As she learned more, she became more adventurous, gradually building and expanding her garden. Eventually she asked a garden designer from Monches Farm in the Holy Hill area to come to her home, look at her space and give her some advice on how to maximize her area. One of the things she does now is intersperse her herb plants with other perennial flowers or vegetables.

Growing predominantly for cooking, Meyer’s garden includes thyme, basil, chives, rosemary, mint, dill and more. Her young daughter, Meredith, helps out. “She enjoys going around the garden, picking things and eating them. She’ll pick handfuls of basil and munch on them! Meredith considers herself to be a gardener.” Meyer makes it a game with her children to tell the differences between the various kinds of herbs through their smell and taste.

Meyer’s advice to would-be gardeners is to just start and to keep it simple. “I don’t want to feel like I have another job to do.” She adds, “Herbs are so easy and the fun thing is the end result—being able to cook with what I’m growing; to know when I’m reading recipes that I can just go outside and clip the herbs I need.”

The ease of growing herbs may be one of their greatest appeals. “Some people think there’s some mystique to growing herbs, but I always say, ‘they are perennials and annuals, just like any flower,’” said Peggy Zautke, the horticulturist in charge of the herb gardens at Boerner Botanical Gardens in Hales Corners, Wis.. Taking a visitor on a recent tour of the gardens, Zautke stated that all most herbs need is full sun for at least half the day and good drainage in the soil.

There are 12 beds containing over 300 varieties of herbs and approximately 700 plants at Boerner Botanical and the beds have themes, such as “herbs for dyeing”, “medicinal herbs,” “culinary herbs,” “native (Wisconsin) herbs,” “biblical herbs” and one that changes each year. This year it features “beverage herbs.” Like Carmichael, Zautke particularly enjoys the fragrance of herbs, but readily adds that there’s so much more to them. “They are so interesting—the history connected to them, the medicinal abilities, the cooking uses, the pest control uses, the scents. It’s not like just growing a plant. It’s a nice looking plant *and* it’s useful!”

Zautke has been at Boerner for 13 years. She offered her visitor, a self-proclaimed “brown thumb,” tips for starting an herb garden. Below is a compilation of advice from Zautke; Carmichael; Irene Lewandowski, a 20-year herb garden veteran and membership chair of the

Wisconsin Chapter of the Herb Society of America; and Will Allen, co-founder of Growing Power in Milwaukee.

Easy Herbs

The following herbs are considered to be easy to grow and hearty enough for the Wisconsin climate:

- French tarragon
- Chives
- Sage
- Thyme
- French thyme (considered the best for culinary purposes)
- Mint
- Oregano
- Lemon balm
- English lavender
- Nasturtiums*
- Basil
- Fennel
- Anise
- Dill*
- Coriander (cilantro)*
- Chervil (French parsley)*
- Arugula*
- Parsley
- Borage*
- Calendula*

Those with an asterisk can be started from seed, if the gardener so chooses. The others are best started from plants.

Rosemary, a perennial, can be tricky, so Zautke recommends potting it. It can then be placed outside during summer (it can even be sunk, in pot, into the soil) then brought back in for the winter. Zautke admits that even she has trouble keeping it alive through the winter, so don't be discouraged if you need to start again the following year.

Creating an Herb Garden:

- Start by reading some good books on herb gardens. There's a wealth of information on different styles, themes, plant varieties and growing tips. (see "resources" sidebar for the experts' picks). Decide what's of interest to you.
- Think about what you want your garden to do for you and what you want to start with – perennials, so you don't need to plant every year? Annuals so you can change your mind next year? Plants you can snip herbs from to cook with? Plants to make teas? Plants to dry and do crafts?
- Decide where you want to place the garden (making sure it has full sun at least half the day).
- Start small! All the experts agreed that it was important to ease into this hobby, because, as easy as it is, it still takes time and can become overwhelming and thus lose the element of enjoyment. A smaller garden takes less time and is still rewarding.
- Make sure you've got good soil. (see "soil" sidebar for details.)
- If you're a beginner, start with plants (versus seeds) for most herbs. (see list above for the experts' recommendations on the best starter herbs).

- Buy your plants from a local, quality green house, nursery or farmer's market. Ask what they put in the soil. Ask if they've used chemicals to treat the plants (some believe that plants that start with chemical fertilizers won't do well once they leave the nursery unless you keep up with chemical treatments, which none of the experts recommend). Ask their advice on how to plant and care for the herbs. Some may even help you lay out your design if you bring a simple diagram of the space you are considering. If the staff is not helpful, and/or the plants don't look well-cared for, it's probably not the right place to buy your plants. It's recommended that you buy locally versus mail order so that you can actually see exactly the state of the plant you are buying.
- Hold off on planting until at least mid-May, due to the possibility of frost, which would kill—or at least really damage—the plants. Basil should not be planted before June.
- Pull as many weeds out of the planting area as possible before planting.
- After creating the correct soil environment (see “soil sidebar”), dig the appropriate size hole for the plant (books and the helpful staff from wherever you bought them can assist you in determining the proper depth and spacing for the plants you have), drop in some compost and/or worm casings, place plant in hole and cover up to the same point that it was covered in the plastic container it came in.
- You may wish to *lightly* top dress the area with some worm castings or compost for an added nutrient boost, but don't smother your plants in dirt.
- Water. For the first week, check every day to see if they are getting dry. If so, water. (But don't drown them with the direct spew of the hose!). After the first week, water a couple times a week, still keeping a close eye on them to avoid them drying out. Once they are mature and established, most herbs are actually drought resistant and watering is not as much of a concern. Water about once a week.
- Once multiple sets of leaves start to appear, you can start harvesting. Read your book to find out the best way to harvest the plants you have. Leave at least two healthy sets of leaves each time you harvest. It is recommended that you harvest regularly, versus just once at the end of the season, to create a hearty plant.
- Weed regularly.
- Your books can also provide information on the best way to dry various herbs and options for wintering them.
- Enjoy!