

Embrace CULINARY *Herbs!*

They look good, smell good,
taste good,
and attract pollinators.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY

Karen Bussolini

Lavender and thyme
planted on a
sunny terrace, with sage
and alyssum

SOME OF THE MOST versatile and best-tasting culinary herbs are great assets in any garden. In fact, many are worth growing even if they never make it to the kitchen. Beautiful (also edible) flowers are reason enough, but the plants also enliven the garden with a wide array of colors, textures, and forms. For example, feathery blue-green dill or bronze fennel gives an airy look, while bold silver, purple, or variegated gold-leaf sages provide long-lasting color. When it comes to upright or weeping forms and tiny-leaf, lacelike, or grassy textures—herbs can provide them all.

Herbs Are Happy Anywhere

A bee-buzzing, sun-soaked garden full of fragrant herbs and flowers is a sensory pleasure, so when planting, think beyond the formal herb garden and tuck in herbs wherever you can:

- In a mixed perennial border, try bronze fennel, lavender, dill, sages, and chives.
- As a low hedge or parterre, lavender and rosemary work well.
- For edging, experiment with parsley, basil, and chives.
- As a ground cover, thymes are reliable.
- Mingle thymes and mint in the lawn.
- Between stepping-stones, plant thymes.
- In containers and window boxes, try any combination.
- Consider the value of herbs as companion plantings in the vegetable garden or orchard: basil with tomatoes, chives with carrots or apple trees, thyme with cabbage.
- On a sunny terrace, enjoy thymes, rosemary, and lavender.
- Between roses, plant lavender (lavender and most roses bloom in June).
- To hold a slope, you can't go wrong with winter savory and/or thymes.
- As a small shrub, tree, or topiary standard, choose rosemary,

bay laurel, or lavender.

- For long-lasting colored foliage, look to golden lemon thyme and 'Berggarten' or golden sage.

Herbs Keep Giving

Herbs not only are good for us, but also improve the health of the entire garden ecosystem. Grown without chemicals, their flowers attract and sustain beneficial insects, both pollinators (such as bees and butterflies) and insects that prey on plant pests. Planting herbs with flowers in diverse colors, shapes, and bloom times ensures insect biodiversity that pays off in pest control services—whether in the vegetable plot, rose border, or flower garden.

Butterfly larvae (caterpillars) need to eat, too. Dill, parsley, and fennel are excellent larval food sources and are vigorous enough to provide enough for everybody. Fragrant herbs repel many insect pests or mask the scent of their host plants.

Most herbs are easy to grow and are relatively pest-free; deer, rabbits, and plant-munching insects don't generally share our taste for pungent plants. However, milder herbs like parsley are fair game for critters. (A resident gourmand



'Six Hills Giant' catmint is used ornamentally as a border, but is also edible and makes a soothing tea.



Thyme is used as a ground cover between stepping-stones.

Give Heat Seekers Special Attention

Resinous woody Mediterranean herbs—rosemary, lavender, thymes, and sages—require full sun; good air circulation; and well-drained, tending-toward-dry, and not overly rich soil. They grow well among rocks, especially limestone.

woodchuck recently prompted me to move my parsley to a container fastened to a high porch railing.)

Herbs for Cultivation and Cooking
HARDY PERENNIALS

Rosemary: In northern regions, grow in a container and overwinter in a cool bright space, watering as needed. In



A vegetable garden with purple basil, purslane, dill, and miniature ‘Pistou’ basil

Save Your Herbs to Savor Later

To brighten winter meals with fresh herb flavor . . .

- Freeze chopped dill, parsley, and chives in plastic freezer bags.
- Infuse olive oil with rosemary or basil.
- Make basil, sage, parsley, or rosemary (or a combination) pesto.
- Mix chopped herbs into softened butter and freeze in airtight containers.
- Dry mint and lemongrass leaves and steep for a calming tea.
- Dry whole thyme stems and grind them for use later. (You do not have to pick off all of those tiny leaves.)
- Layer herbs of choice in sea salt. When they’re dry, pulverize only the herbs in a coffee/spice grinder (one not used for coffee). Add dried lemon peel, if desired, then remix into the salt. For a finer blend, grind the salt and herbs together.

southern regions, try prostrate forms as a ground cover or “spiller” in a container or draped over a wall. Plant upright forms as an evergreen hedge.

Cut stems to skewer kebabs or burn on the grill for aroma. Put a twig into a jar of homemade applesauce. A compote of slowly cooked sweet onions, rhubarb, white wine, and rosemary is divine.

Chives: Chives, in the Allium (onion) family, share the beauty of their ornamental inedible cousins. Lovely as individual clumps, they also make a fine edging plant.

Snip into egg dishes, salads, or anything that needs a little zip.

Lavender: Tough and very drought-resistant, sweet-smelling English lavenders are best for cooking. Flowers make a lovely edible garnish and also can be added to cookie or cake batter, sprinkled on fruit or vegetables, and infused in sugar or milk for custard or cheesecake. Leaves can be substituted for rosemary.

Mints: Spearmint; peppermint; and orange, chocolate, and pineapple mint need a well-edged bed or container, if you don’t have room for them to roam.

Mints add subtle flavor to cold drinks and desserts, but they are great in foods, too. Add to soups (near the end of cooking), cucumber dishes, peas, tabbouleh, and salads. Many mint relatives are better known as ornamentals, but bee balm and catmint species are tasty as well.

Thymes: Let thymes creep and self-seed into a lawn or plant as a ground cover.

Thymes—especially lemon, mother-of-thyme, French, and caraway—complement bean dishes, soups, and roasted meats.

Sages: Silvery common sage, its round-leaf cultivar ‘Berggarten’, and golden sage are among the most attractive plants for long-lasting flowers and foliage.

Try leaves as an invigorating tea, crisped in olive oil, stuffed under the skin of a whole roasting chicken, or cut into ribbons and added to rice dishes, corn bread, or fritters.

TENDER PERENNIALS

Bronze fennel: Fennel’s fine texture and purple-bronze color make for lively contrasts and color combos. A lovely foil for small early-spring bulbs, it keeps pace as the garden grows taller—just do not plant near vegetables (it inhibits growth).

Anise-scented foliage enhances fish dishes and salads. Yellow umbels, which are beneficial insect magnets, are followed by seeds used in baking and liquors. Harvest the seeds to prevent overenthusiastic self-sowing.

Lemongrass: One small plant will grow into a big, bold clump of ornamental grass by the end of summer, more than enough to make every Thai or Vietnamese dish in the book and to freeze for winter use. *(continued on page 92)*

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LANDSCAPE DESIGN

Mexican mint marigold: This herb with pretty yellow flowers is familiar to southwestern gardeners as a stand-in for tarragon, which does not thrive there.

Use leaves in salads or tea or add to poultry or fish dishes near the end of cooking.

ANNUALS

Basil: Varieties of heat-loving basil abound. Cinnamon basil stands up to chopping and cooking. It's delicious in black tea. Genovese types are Italian culinary classics. Highly ornamental 'Pesto Perpetuo', a tall, variegated basil, does not bloom; it keeps its good taste for season-long pesto-making.

Wrap food for the grill in big-leaf basil. Mix the whole, tiny leaves of 'Minette' in salads. Experiment with Thai basil and lemon basil.

Parsley: Curly parsley makes an especially lovely border or sprightly green companion to flowers in a container. Both curly and Italian (flat-leaf) parsleys are biennial but are grown as annuals in cold climates.

Italian parsley has more flavor and is used more often in cooking. The decorative curly parsley is used mostly for garnishes.

Dill: Sow seeds in cool weather with cut-and-come-again greens or in spring flower beds. It bolts fast in hot weather, but the flowers are spectacular and, if you're lucky, it will self-sow.

The leaves, flowers, and seeds enhance sauces, salads, fish dishes, and breads.

Karen Bussolini is a garden writer, speaker, photographer, and eco-friendly garden coach. She is also an improvisational cook.

Cooking Fresh

When using fresh herbs in a recipe that calls for dried herbs, use three times the measured amount.



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