Gardening Basics

Planting Your First Herb Garden

Get excited

Having fresh herbs just by walking out into your garden will be a most rewarding experience. Many commonly used culinary herbs grow well in North Texas, and that is great news for beginning gardeners. More good news is that, once established, herbs are generally disease resistant, require only a small amount of supplemental water during dry conditions, and do not need fertilizing if they live in soil that contains a good mix of organic materials.

Make decisions:

Who: Herb gardens require initial care to be productive. They will be attractive with minimal weeding and pruning, Consider beginning small and expanding over time.
What: Choosing which herbs to grow is a pleasurable challenge. Herbs originating from warm climate areas, such as Mexico and the Mediterranean, have an excellent chance of success in North Texas.
When: Cool season and perennial herbs can be planted in the fall or early spring. Herbs sensitive to cool temperatures (annuals), such as basil, should be planted after all danger of frost, usually in April.
Where: Herbs can grow in a dedicated herb garden, interspersed with landscape plants or vegetables, or in containers. Be sure to locate your herbs close to your home to allow easy harvesting and watering.
Why: Fresh herbs make food taste better. Birds, bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies enjoy herb flowers and seeds

Create a plan

First, decide where to place your herb garden. Choose a garden site with at least 4–6 hours of direct sun per day for most herbs. The morning sun is best. Make sure your site has access to water. Because herb plants come in several sizes when mature, understanding the size and growth habits of each type helps you place them correctly in your plan. For example:

- Rosemary is a shrub that can be 5 feet tall and wide.
- Mint spreads aggressively and is best planted in its own bed or container.



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Plan out your future herb garden on paper or use an online gardening planning guide. Several web-based tools are available by searching for “garden planting applications.” Your plan should provide space around each plant sufficient to allow air movement, access to the sun, and room for you to harvest. Put tall herbs toward the back or place them on the west side to provide afternoon shade. Low-growing herbs, such as thyme, oregano, chives, and sage, may be used as border plants. Group plants together based on their water and sun needs.

See the **Resources** list at the end of this publication for recommended herbs as well as information about container gardening and raised beds.

Prepare the garden beds

You may choose to plant your herbs in the ground, in raised beds, or in containers. Because North Texas' clay soils suffer from poor drainage and alkalinity, many gardeners choose to grow in raised beds or containers filled with potting soil.

- Clear the area of plants and other materials.
- Dig over the soil to a depth of 8–10 inches and work in 3–4 inches of compost.
- (optional) Place a soaker hose or drip irrigation to water plants. This method saves water and keeps moisture away from plant leaves, which can lead to disease problems. Having a watering system in place also relieves the gardener from carrying hoses to the garden.
- Raised beds with a soil depth of 8-10 inches can be constructed using wood, concrete blocks, or other materials.

Plant

Herbs can be grown from seeds, transplants, or cuttings. However, seed germination for herb plants is often slow and unsuccessful. Since your new herb garden will likely have only one or two of each type, transplants offer the best chance of success. If using seeds, be sure to follow the planting directions on the seed packet. If using transplants dig a hole equal to the depth of the plant in its container. Gently remove the plant from the container by turning the pot upside down, and while supporting the plant with your hand, gently tap the rim of the pot against a hard surface. Put the plant into the hole so the stem is at the same depth as it was in its small pot and push the soil around it and press firmly to ensure good contact with the roots. Moisten the soil. Add a 2-3-inch layer of mulch around, but not touching, the plant (like a donut) to help moisture retention, soil temperature moderation, and weed control.



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Care and harvesting

Keep the soil around your newly planted herbs moist for a few days to encourage the roots to move into the surrounding soil. After that period of transition, only add water when the soil 1–2 inches deep is dry. Use an inexpensive moisture meter (available at most plant nurseries) to gauge soil moisture. The organic material you added to the soil at the beginning and the later decomposition of the mulch you placed on top of the soil will provide all the nutrients that your plants need. You may harvest herbs any time after the plant has successfully added a few inches of new growth. For example, you can harvest:

- Basil when the plant is about 6–8 inches tall
- Oregano when sprigs are 4-inches long
- Parsley as soon as leaves have a mature size
- Rosemary and thyme at any time

For annual herbs, such as basil, when flowers appear remove them to help maintain leaf growth. After the flowers then seeds form, the leaves become bitter tasting so pinch flowers out to keep the plant growing.

Resources

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