

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...once established herbs plants 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. If you will be the one responsible for the garden, 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.

When: Cool season and perennial herbs can be planted in the fall or early spring. Herbs sensitive to cool temperatures, 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 your landscape plants or vegetables or in containers. Be sure to keep your herb plants close enough 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 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 of herb 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.

Plan out your future herb garden on graph paper or use an online gardening planning guide. You will find several

web-based tools by searching for “garden planting applications.” Your plan should provide space around each plant sufficient to allow drying and access to the sun. Put tall herbs toward the back or place them on the west side to provide afternoon shade. Low-growing herbs may be used as border plants, such as thyme, oregano, chives, and sage. Group plants based on their water and sun needs.



Prepare the garden beds

You may choose to plant your herbs in the ground or in raised beds. Because North Texas clay soils can be challenging due to poor drainage and alkalinity, many gardeners choose to grow in raised beds filled with potting soil.

1. Clear the area of plants and other materials.
2. Turn the soil to a depth of 8–10 inches and work in 3–4 inches of composted materials.

3. (optional) Place a soaker hose or drip irrigation to water plants. This efficient method of delivery 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.
4. Raised beds can be constructed using wood, concrete blocks, logs, or other materials. A soil depth of at least 8–10 inches is recommended.

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. Dig a hole equal to the depth of the plant in its container. Gently remove the plant from the nursery 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 and push the soil around it. Press the soil firmly to ensure good contact with the transplant's roots and moisten the soil. Add a 3-inch layer of mulch around, but not touching, the plant to help moisture retention, soil temperature moderation, and weed control.



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. 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 the plant begins to flower, it is preparing to produce seeds and die. Removing the flowers can help maintain leaf growth for a while. After flowering, the leaves become bitter tasting.

More information:

<http://dcmga.com/files/2012/10/Herb-Presentation-for-website.pdf>

http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/organic/files/2011/03/E-561_growing_herbs_texas.pdf

Building a raised bed garden: http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/files/2010/10/E-560_raised_bed_garden.pdf

https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/files/2010/10/E-560_raised_bed_garden.pdf

Here is a list of herbs you can grow in North Texas (<http://dcmga.com/files/2012/10/North-Texas-Herbs.pdf>).