

HERBS

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Herbs have been around for thousands of years. Herb gardens, like the herbs themselves, have been a constant in ever changing societies and numerous cultures through out history. Sometimes they are popular and sometimes they take a backseat to the latest fad of the day.

Today, herbs are of high interest, and not just for cooking, but also for their many other uses. Since early times herbs have improved the flavor of the day's catch, and today, still, herbs make any plain meal into a gourmet delight, but that is not all herbs do!

In yesteryear, medicinal herbs were grown to heal and care for people. They were the only medicines to be had. A resurgence in the possible health benefits of herbs is gradually taking place. Did you know that yarrow placed on a bad cut will stop the bleeding? Or, that crushed plantain is a balm for insect bites and the itch of poison ivy? Herbs can be natural pest repellents. Their fragrances are known world wide for calming, soothing, rejuvenating, and just plain smellin' good! We drink them as tea, scent our linen closets, and cook with them. What kitchen cupboard is there that doesn't have some kind of herb in it? And herbs aren't just for people anymore! One of my co-workers is looking into adding herbs to her horse's diet to help with attitude and health problems.

Let's take a look at some of the culinary and medicinal properties of herbs. Remember that herbs are not regulated and may grow with more potency one year as opposed to the next.

MINTS have a stimulating and refreshing quality. They can be infused in your bath water, brewed as teas, made into jelly, used to flavor lemonade and other cool drinks. Place mint in cupboards to repel mice and hang by bunches at entryways to repel insects. Peppermint tea can be used as a gargle for sore throats, a drink to relieve headaches, tension, insomnia, nervousness, and trembling. A strong cup of peppermint tea may help ward of colds and flu, if it taken at the first sign of symptoms. Peppermint is good for relieving indigestion and symptoms of gas. Drinking the tea

can leave you feeling comfortably cool. This is because peppermint brings more blood to the skin, where evaporation wicks away body heat. This characteristic leads us to one of the most traditional uses of peppermint tea, that of breaking fevers.

Mints are easy and fun to grow, but beware, they are perennial and they can turn into an invasive weed. If they escape into your yard, it might not be all bad because mowing them releases their scent and the air is a pleasure to breathe. One of the best ways to keep them confined is to plant them in a buried bottomless container. It needs to be 18 – 24 inches deep or the roots will simply grow under the barrier and escape. Another simple solution is to plant them in their own place where it is OK if they grow all over. They like rich, moist, well drained soil. They will do well in full sun or partial shade and do best when their roots are kept cool and moist.

One of the most prominent characteristics of mints is their square stem. Peppermint has a purple stem. The green of mint leaves can be bright or dark, scalloped edged or smooth, and the leaves are where the essential fragrant oil is. Harvest around 10:00 in the morning, after dew has evaporated and before it gets so hot the essential oils are dissipated.

ROSEMARY is a memory strengthener, an antiseptic and an astringent, helps nervous stomach, restores digestion, and helps relieve gas symptoms. In China, rosemary brewed as a tea has been popular in treating headache, insomnia, and mental fatigue. Rosemary is a token of loyalty, constancy and remembrance.

It is the delicate needle like leaves and tiny nondescript flowers of the rosemary that are used medicinally and in cooking. The leaves are best when used fresh. When they are dried they turn into little sticks and can only be kept for a year. Rosemary leaves are used to flavor lamb, pork, poultry, beef, veal, stew, stuffing, vegetables, herb butters, vinegar, jam, and herb bread.

Rosemary is a woody evergreen shrub native to southern France. It cannot survive our harsh winter temperatures, therefore it should be planted in a pot and brought inside before a hard frost. Rosemary will be happy to be planted in the garden in the spring in a sheltered, southerly location with a light well-drained alkaline soil. To bring indoors in the fall dig

up the plant. If it is very big and too large to fit into your location in the house, cut back 1/3 – 1/2 of the roots and the same amount of crown. Transplant in a pot, bring indoors to its location and water. Potted rosemary does best in a west window. It will take the plant a few weeks to recover its pruning and to start growing again. Keep it evenly moist but not wet during this time.

Rosemary Biscuits

2 cups flour
1-tsp. sugar
2-tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. dried ground rosemary leaves
Pinch of salt
4-tbsp. butter
2/3 cup milk
1 egg

Sift together the flour, baking powder, salt, sugar and rosemary. Work in the butter till the flour mixture resembles course meal. Mix together the milk and egg and add to the flour mixture. Mix with fork till dough leaves the side of the bowl, then knead lightly and briefly on a floured board. Roll out to half-inch thickness, cut into 2-inch rounds, and bake at 450-degree oven for about 12 minutes, or until lightly browned. Makes about 18 biscuits.

SAGE according to herbalists can cure just about anything. It has been highly regarded as a tonic that keeps the stomach, intestines, kidneys, liver, spleen and sexual organs healthy. Sage is considered a stimulant that can relieve headache, break fevers, and help reduce cold symptoms. It helps to strengthen the brain and nervous system.

If you like poultry seasoning on your chicken and turkey, then you'll be glad to know that sage is one of the main ingredients. Sage can also be used on pork, goose, wild game, soups, stews, fish, lamb, veal, and vegetables. It can also be used in herb butters, herb breads and cheeses.

There are several varieties, but it is the hardy perennial common sage that is desired by cooks. Sage grows well and can be successfully started from seed. It will reach its peak for usefulness and vigor at 3 or 4 years and should be replaced by new plants after this time period. The plants develop woody, gnarly stems and fewer leaves as they become older. Sage likes full sun and rich, well-drained, loamy soil.

Sage Sauce for roasted meats

2 tbsp. Butter
3 med. Onions, chopped
2 tbsp. flour
2 cups beef bouillon
3 tsp. fresh or 2 tsp. dried sage leaves, very finely minced
½ cup half and half
salt to taste

In a heavy skillet or saucepan, melt the butter and lightly sauté the chopped onions till soft and transparent, being careful not to burn them. Mix in the flour and cook, stirring until smooth. Add the bouillon and sage leaves and cook for about 1 minute, till sauce thickens. Slowly stir in the half and half. Salt to taste and serve spooned over the sliced roasted meat or in a gravy bowl. Makes 3 cups.

BASIL has been called the king of herbs. It is classified as a warming and moistening herb. It is a fragrant and gentle herb that can be brewed as a tea to relieve headache and nausea. It has been used for nervous disorders, stomach cramps, and whooping cough. It has antispasmodic and antibacterial properties along with a mild sedative.

In cooking basil can be used in soups, stews, sauces, seafood, chicken, beef, lamb, pork, vegetables, and salads.

It is a good companion plant for tomatoes, helping them to grow strong and healthy, better able to ward off insects and disease.

Basil is an annual that needs full sun, rich well-drained soil and protection from cold winds. Seeds can be started indoors or sown directly in the garden.

Pesto Genovese

2 cups fresh basil leaves
1/3 cup olive oil
3 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
1 tbsp. of pine nuts
¼ tsp. salt
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

Put the basil, oil, pine nuts and salt in a blender and process till smooth. Stir in the cheese. Toss with 1 pound cooked pasta. Makes four servings.

Sweet Cicely has fernlike foliage with lacy white flowers that are very attractive. This herb can be planted in a cool partially shaded place close to an entryway or garden path. As beautiful as it is in the garden, it has even greater value in the kitchen.

As its name implies, it has a sweet anise-like flavor. In colonial times sweet cicely was used in place of sugar, as it was easily grown in the culinary garden. All parts of the plant are edible and useful in different ways. The ripe long black seed pods can be brought into the house for winter bouquets, or used in the green stage for sweetening fruits, fruit pies, candy, syrups, cakes and liqueurs. The leaves can be chopped up and added to salad dressing, omelets, soups, stews, herb butters, cooked root vegetables, fruit cups and whipped cream. The roots can be dug up and prepared like parsnip.

Sweet Cicely is an early herald of spring and as such is considered a tonic that strengthens and restores and is very good for the digestion.

Plum Salad

1 pound ripe plums
1 tbsp. fresh sweet cicely, chopped
½ cup yogurt
juice of half a lemon

Stone and dice the plums, add the chopped sweet cicely, and mix in the yogurt and lemon juice. Chill and serve.

Summer Savory as a flavoring for wine was thought to soothe both the nerves and the stomach. Early herbalist would recommend it as a purgative and a remedy for ailments of the lungs and liver. The leaves when crushed can relieve the pain from a bee sting.

Summer Savory is most popular as the ‘bean herb’ because it is commonly cooked with beans and members of the cabbage family to reduce the flatulence these foods produce. Savory should be used where a mild peppery taste is desired.

Summer savory is an annual and should not be confused with Winter Savory that is perennial. Summer savory is bushy and compact, growing about 1 ½ feet tall. It grows easily from seed and can be started in flats indoors or directly in the garden soil as soon as the ground can be worked. It needs

full sun and average garden soil. It has a spindly habit and should be planted close enough to support each other. Hilling the plants also helps them to stand up. Savory is a good companion plant to beans and onions as it will improve their growth and flavor as well as deter bean beetles. Grow it between the bean plants.

Sauce for Poultry

2 tbsp. oil
1 cup mushrooms
1 tbsp. each of fresh, finely chopped summer savory and parsley
2 tbsp. flour
1-1/2 cup chicken broth
½ cup white wine
salt and pepper to taste
3 tbsp. sour cream

Heat the oil and sauté the mushrooms and herbs. Add the flour and cook, stirring until smooth. Add chicken broth, wine and salt and pepper to taste and stir until sauce thickens.

Cook over medium to low heat, covered, for 15 minutes. Add the sour cream just before serving. Pour over cooked poultry. Makes enough to accompany 4 servings.

(All recipes are from The Cornell Book of Herbs and Edible Flowers by Jean Mackin.)

Look for the “**Just Plant It, NY**” herb video on the CCE Cortland website.

To find out more about these and other herbs call the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Cortland County at 607-391-2668.