

Adding Fresh Herbs to your Culinary Toolbox

Secret Ingredients for your Cafeteria Recipes

Herb	Flavor Profile	Uses
Basil (sweet) Annual 	Floral anise- and clove-like flavor and aroma	Ideal pairing with tomatoes, use in sauces, sandwiches, soups and salads
Chives Perennial 	Onion chives have a mild green onion taste, small round tubular mature plants while Garlic chives are stronger in flavor, flat-bladed mature plants	Add a sprinkle of freshly minced Onion chives just prior to serving, easily lose flavor when heated
Cilantro Annual 	Bright, refreshing flavor with a faint undertone of anise. Leaves are often mistaken for flat-leaf parsley	One of the most versatile herbs; staple for Latin and Asian cuisine. Adds a distinctive flavor to salsas, soups, stews, curries, salads, vegetables, fish, and chicken dishes
Dill Annual 	Overtones of parsley, anise and celery with subtle lemon	Feathery leaves lend a fresh, sharp flavor to many foods
Lemon Balm Perennial 	Member of mint family; also known as Sweet Melissa. Young tender leaves add a honey-tinged citrus flavor	Slightly tart flavor is great for salads, meats and poultry
Mint Perennial 	Though there are many varieties, Spearmint is preferred for cooking. Spearmint's bright green leaves are fuzzy while Peppermint leaves are round with dark stems	Extremely versatile and can be used in both sweet and savory dishes
Oregano Perennial 	Also known as Wild Marjoram. There are many varieties, trust senses to help you choose, lightly brush the leaves and breath in the scent, a stronger smell equates to a stronger taste	Pairs very well with tomatoes and other Mediterranean herbs, such as basil. Add toward the end of the cooking process to help maximize natural flavor
Parsley Biennial 	Mild, peppery flavor . Curly parsley is less assertive than Flat-leaf (Italian) parsley	Flat-leaf parsley is preferred for cooking, as it stands up better to heat and has more flavor
Rosemary Perennial 	Silver-green needle-shaped leaves are highly aromatic	Versatile seasoning for fruit salads, soups, vegetables, meat, fish and egg dishes
Sage Perennial 	Long, narrow leaves have a distinctively fuzzy texture and musty flavor redolent of eucalyptus, cedar, lemon and mint	Often used to flavor cured meats, sausage, pork, veal and stuffing/ dressing recipes. Use with discretion, the flavor can overwhelm a dish
Thyme Perennial 	Available in dozens of varieties; most people prefer French thyme	Leaves are small and often don't require chopping. Pairs well with many other herbs, especially rosemary, parsley, sage, savory and oregano

Herb Gardening 101

Know your zone. If planting herbs outside, it will be helpful to know Central Texas is in climate zone 8b. This will help identify when to plant particular varieties.

Start small. First time gardeners should keep the number of herb plants manageable.

Skip the seeds. Purchase transplants for a better chance of success. Choose plants that are true to color, aren't overgrown in the pot and do not show signs of rot or fungus.

Get sunny. Herbs need at least six hours of sun each day. Sunlight forces the plants to produce the oils that give them flavor.

Think high and dry. Planting herbs in a raised bed (10 inches or more off the ground) will help ensure good drainage, which is essential for healthy herbs. Fill the bed with equal parts of sterilized topsoil, peat moss and sand or fine gravel. The mixture will have a slightly acidic or near-neutral pH — the ideal environment for most herbs.

Down in front. Smaller herbs belong in the front part of a garden so they are not shaded by taller plants.

Let them breathe. Breezy conditions keep plants drier and discourages the growth of fungus. If planting herbs outside, keep them 12 to 18 inches from the nearest fence, wall or other high barrier. In general, allow 18 inches between plants.

Remember to mulch. An inch or two of mulch will stifle the growth of weeds, help keep herbs clean and protect the soil from baking around the roots during the summer. Avoid pine-bark mulch and grass clippings as they tend to make soil more acidic. Be careful not to mulch too heavily at the base of your plants, or they may rot.

Feed sparingly. Generally, perennial herbs need all-purpose, slow-release fertilizer worked into the soil before planting and each spring. Annuals will produce much better if you feed them more often.

Water early and less than you think. Water in the morning; evening watering may encourage the growth of fungus because the plant won't have an opportunity to dry out completely. Generally, herbs need only about an inch of water per week. More water is needed after initial planting and during times of severe heat and drought.

Harvest early and often. A general rule of thumb is "the more you pick, the more you get". If annual plants flower and produce seeds, they quit growing leaves. Harvest in the morning, when the herbs' oils are at their strongest. Clip the skins instead of plucking individual leaves off the plant.

How to Store Fresh Herbs

Basil, Parsley and Cilantro

These fresh herbs can be treated like a bouquet of flowers: trim the ends, place in a glass with an inch or so of water and place on the counter at room temperature. Do not store in the refrigerator or the leaves will turn black. Herbs will remain fresh for anywhere from a few days to a week.

Chives, Thyme and Rosemary

Wrap herbs loosely in plastic wrap and place the bundle in the warmest part of the refrigerator; one of the compartments in the door works perfectly. Do not wrap the herbs tightly or the trapped moisture may cause them to mold prematurely. A crumpled paper towel can be added to the bag to help prevent mold growth. Do not rinse the herbs until just before using.

How to Dry Fresh Herbs

If you have more fresh herbs than you can use, dry them. Place the leaves on a plate (chopped if using basil or parsley; whole if using thyme or rosemary) and set aside in a cool, dry place for several days. Then store them in a re-sealable container in the refrigerator.

When to Pitch Fresh Herbs

Fresh herbs are no longer fit to use and should be discarded when the leaves turn dark or brittle, or the stems begin to show traces of mold.

The Texas Department of Agriculture can assist with current farm to school efforts and identify next steps. Explore the possibilities at www.SquareMeals.org.



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