



Tips for a Successful Indoor Herb Garden

By Laurel Rady

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Nothing beats the fragrance of fresh herbs growing on a kitchen windowsill. With the right conditions and a little practice, even gardeners in cold climates can enjoy indoor herb gardens. The quickest way to begin is to select young plants instead of growing from seed. Choose culinary herbs that are easiest to grow inside, such as chives, mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, and thyme. Read each plant's tag to determine its mature size, and choose a pot for each that will accommodate growth. Inspect each plant for damage, insects, and disease. Roots should be loose, not rootbound. Choose only healthy plants -- you will be eating the leaves!

Plant herbs in clean pots that offer excellent drainage, and allow room for root growth. Clay or glazed pots with a bottom drainage dish are best. Place pots and saucers on a waterproof tray to protect furniture and floors.

Use a light potting mix for indoor plants. Herbs can grow outdoors in almost any soil, but you want a fresh, sterilized mix for plants grown in your home to avoid bringing in soil pathogens. A good recipe is two parts potting soil to one part Perlite, or purchase a potting mix that has these components.

Pour some potting mix into the pot, place the herb in the center, tuck the soil around the plant, and press lightly on top. Don't use too much pressure -- overly compacted soil prevents root growth. Plants need air and moisture around their roots for plant health and to prevent root rot, so water the transplant, but don't overwater thereafter. Each herb has its own water needs. Lemon balm and mint need evenly-moist soil that is never completely dry. Oregano, sage and thyme benefit from letting the soil dry out between waterings. Most herbs do well if they are watered only when the top 1-2" of soil is dry. The most common cause of plant death is overwatering.

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Place your herbs in a west- or south-facing window, so they receive a minimum of six hours of bright sunlight per day. Turn each pot weekly, so it gets equal light on all sides. Window glass transmits cold from the outside, so avoid placing herbs too close to the window or letting their leaves touch the glass. On cold nights, place cardboard between the window and the herbs for additional protection.

Unlike plants growing outdoors, which seldom need fertilizer, plants in containers may need amendment with nitrogen to promote leaf growth. Use just small amounts of fertilizer. During the growing season (April-October), give the plants a monthly dose at 1/4 the amount recommended for outdoor plants. In spring and fall, flush out all fertilizer build-up by running cool water through the soil for a few minutes. Perform this flush-out in the sink, with slow-running water. During the winter (November-March), stop fertilizing and reduce watering frequency.

To harvest your herbs, use clean, sharp scissors. Clipping actually stimulates growth. Trim from the top, to encourage the plant to branch out and become bushier. Large leaves might seem like the natural choice for cutting and eating, but they are also the plant's solar panels, absorbing light so the herb can thrive. If you prune only mature leaves, your plant will have difficulty growing, so cut a mixture of leaf types. Never remove more than 1/3 of the leaves at one time.

Get growing, and enjoy the fragrance, beauty, and taste of fresh herbs!

Join us on April 13, in the Sherwood Demonstration Garden (address below) for Second Saturdays in the Garden. This month's topics will include "Growing Succulents, Soil, Cover Crops, and Companion Planting." Fruit tree pruning will be demonstrated in the orchard. A demonstration on Straw Bale Gardening will be presented in the Vegetable Garden. It is also a great time, weather permitting, to tour the garden to identify plant varieties you might want to purchase at our plant sale, which will be held in the garden on April 20, from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorf.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512, or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorf.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see <http://ucanr.edu/master gardener e-news>. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.