

## **Planning Your Herb Garden**

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Herb plants in their spice or fresh forms are excellent additions to any garden bed, container area, or windowsill. They often have terrific shapes and are great additions to a flowerbed for their attractive qualities alone. Take care to select the right plant for the right location, like any garden plan.

Most importantly, consider the sunlight and drainage needs of the plants. Just about all herbs need a lot of bright sunlight and rich, but well-drained soil. These plants are constantly renewing their vegetative growth or working hard to produce seeds, meaning they will use up a lot of nutrients in the soil. Regular application of a well-balanced fertilizer will help them to thrive.

Consider the specific requirements of each variety when planning their placement. Tags in potted herbs or descriptions on websites or on seed packages are great sources for specific variety information.

Lots of sunlight will encourage faster seed production in many herbs as well. For example, cilantro likes cooler air temperatures or it will bolt, sending up seed heads and reducing the amount and quality of fresh leaves available for cooking. If you would like to harvest coriander – the seeds of cilantro – instead of fresh leaves, encourage that growth. Dill seed heads, another annual that may bolt quickly, are added to pickle recipes. Depending on its end use, you may cut things back faster or let them run wild.

When you are planning the location for your herbs, think about what you would like that bed to look like all year round. Oregano, a perennial, will send up flowers at the end of its growing season that will need to be pruned to the ground. New growth comes from the base and that usually stays green throughout the winter.

Other perennials can cover an area quickly, even with frequent pruning. Rosemary can grow quite large, spreading its woody branches over the edge of a raised bed or in an upright form depending on the variety selected. Mint spreads – very easily – from both runners and seeds, and will soon cover a large area if not contained.

Annuals present other design location challenges. Basil, an annual that was such a wonderful bushy plant throughout the summer, starts to look ragged as it reaches the end of its cycle. Parsley, a biennial with a two year overall growth cycle, is a fun addition to a flowerbed with its rich color and dense growth pattern. But would you really like to have it in a decorative location when you've cut a lot out of it for dinner?

Most people plant herbs because they like to cook with them, so location is important. An herb garden should be easily accessible – no one wants to tromp through puddles of muddy water to snip off a little oregano for that special sauce in the middle of winter. And if the plant is growing in a decorative area, think about how often you will be cutting it back for use and what that means for overall appearance.

A final thought on planning your herb garden is the layout of a dedicated space itself. For example, tall plants should still be 'in back', that is, in a place where they won't shade smaller plants. Plants you want to use often, like those snips of basil or oregano, should be closer to your access point, and others, such as lemon grass or tarragon which you may not use as regularly, could be placed where they might be a little harder to reach.

The most important thing to remember, though, is to use those herbs and spices often in your cooking. They are an easy and fat-free way to turn a ho-hum dish into something that is uniquely yours. Try something new each season – don't just rely on the ones you've planted year after year. Some of these may become your new favorites.

Next month, we'll talk about preparing various planting areas based on the growing conditions and needs of various herb plants.

Learn about that all important plant medium – soil, at the free Master Gardener class on Saturday, March 31<sup>st</sup>. The class will discuss types of soil found in the foothills and how it affects everything that is grown. Amendments, mulches and fertilizers – when you need what and how much you need, will be discussed. The class is from 9 a.m. to 12 noon and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive in Placerville.

Mark your calendar for the Master Gardener Plant Sale on Saturday, April 28<sup>th</sup>. There will be a great selection of annuals, perennials and vegetables. The sale is from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and will be held in the Veterans Memorial Building parking lot.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.