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Herbs: Beautiful and Useful Plants

By Jan Keahey

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In addition to being a Master Gardener, I'm also a Foodie. We Foodies spend a great deal of time growing food, researching recipes, planning, shopping, preserving, and so on. Our pastimes include reading about famous chefs, all of whom share one passion: freshness. Some chefs like Alice Waters of Chez Panise in Berkeley, have their own farms and the menu is driven by what's ready to harvest at the farm. This is especially important with herbs because many of them have a more fragile nature. There is no comparison between the fresh herbs you buy in the store and what you can grow yourself. And if you're planning on preserving herbs, fresh picked right out of the garden is the only way to go.

Herbs can be planted almost anywhere, including right in with your existing landscape plants. Most require six hours of full sun, well drained soil, free from woody plant roots and access to water. They should also be in a location convenient to the kitchen if possible. A few herbs such as Sweet Woodruff and mints prefer shade. Herbs don't require rich soil but adding some organic matter is helpful. Also, during our hot summer months it's good to apply a layer of mulch around the plants to help retain moisture and keep the roots cooler.

Local nurseries now carry a wide variety of herbs. You can also start your own from seed, by taking cuttings, layering and dividing existing plants. Or, my favorite way of getting new herbs for my own garden, is to dig up volunteer herbs around plants in my friends' gardens. Most gardeners love to share so don't overlook this option.

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Many herbs grow exceptionally well in containers. As with other plants in containers, size is important. If the container is too small, it will quickly become root bound and dry out. Also you want to use a potting mix in the container instead of garden soil.

Many herbs are drought tolerant and benefit from deep, infrequent watering. Annuals may require more water. Herbs need little fertilizer. A light application of a balanced, slow release fertilizer in the spring should be sufficient. Except for annual herbs like basil, which benefit from a light application mid-season. The key here is LIGHT application. Herbs do not like to be heavily fertilized.

Providing good air circulation will help prevent fungal diseases, and well-drained soil and fertilizing sparingly will help insure pest and disease-free plants.

Harvest your herbs in the early morning or evening after it's cooled down for best flavor. For optimum quality and quantity, harvest just when flower buds appear. The sky is the limit -- enjoy these tasty, useful plants in your own garden!

Join UCCE Master Gardener Jan Keahey and UCCE Master Food Preserver Cheryl Knapp for a free class on Wednesday, May 11: Culinary Herbs and Spices; from Garden to Gourmet. No fat, low fat, no salt, watch the sugar: we're constantly bombarded about how to eat healthier. One of the best ways to introduce healthy flavor into meals is to use herbs in our cooking. Learn how easy herbs are to grow in our area, as well as when to harvest and how to preserve these tasty plants. Class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon at Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive in Cameron Park.

Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open to the public Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Behind Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions at local Farmers Markets, and Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.