



Excerpts from Central Texas Horticulture and the real dirt a Garden Handbook for Parker County. Parker County Master Gardener also added to the article.

FALL IS FOR HERBS

Herbs are plants that are used as flavoring agents. The common herbs used in cooking are referred to as culinary herbs. Mild or savory herbs impart a delicate flavor to food while the stronger or pungent herbs add zest to foods. These herbs are attractive and varied so their ornamental value is also important.

The ornamental value of herbs enables them to be used in flowerbeds, borders, rock gardens, or corner plantings. Some herbs are annuals while others are perennial or come up year after year. You can locate annual herbs in your annual flower garden, herb garden or vegetable garden. The perennial herbs can be located at the side of the garden where they won't interfere with next year's soil preparation.

Care for the herb garden will be similar to your vegetable or flower garden. Select a sunny, well-drained location. Apply a slow-release fertilizer at the rate of 2- pounds per 100 square feet.

Water as necessary during dry periods. Generally, you need about one inch of water per week, if not supplied by natural rainfall. A mulch will help conserve soil moisture and reduce weed growth as well. The mints prefer moist soil so they will require more frequent watering.

Annual and biennial herbs can be established by planting the seed directly in the garden or starting seeds indoors for later transplanting to the garden. You can save seed produced by the herb plants for next year's crop or obtain seed from your local garden center or seed catalog.

To save your own seed, harvest the entire seed head after it has dried on the plant. The seeds should then be allowed to dry in a protected location that is cool and dry. After the seeds are thoroughly dry, thresh the seed from the seed heads and discard the trash. Store in labeled jars in a dark, cool, dry location.

Some herb seeds such as dill, anise, caraway, or coriander can be used for flavorings.

Perennial herbs can be propagated by cuttings or by division. Divide plants every three to four years in the early spring. The plants should be dug up and cut into several sections. You can also cut four to six inch sections of the stem and root these by placing the cuttings in moist sand in a shady area. In four to eight weeks, roots should form on these cuttings. Herbs such as sage, winter savory, and thyme can be propagated by cuttings. Chives, lovage, and tarragon can be propagated by division of the roots or crowns.

Leaves of many herbs such as parsley and chives can be harvested for fresh seasonings. On these plants you can gradually remove some of the leaves, as you need them. Don't remove all the foliage at one time. These plants will produce over a long period of time if they are cared for well.

On rosemary and thyme, clip the tops when the plants are in full bloom. Usually, leaves and flowers are harvested together. Basil, fennel, mint, sage, summer savory, sweet marjoram, tarragon, and winter savory are harvested just before the plant starts to bloom.

Chervil and parsley leaves can be cut and dried anytime. Lovage leaves should be harvested early during the first flush of growth.

After harvesting, hang the herbs in loosely tied bundles in a well-ventilated room. You can also spread the branches on a screen, cheesecloth, or hardware cloth. For herbs where leaves only are needed, the leaves can be spread on flat trays. Keep dust off the herbs by a cloth or similar protective cover that will allow moisture to pass through.

Many of the herbs we grow today are from the Mediterranean region of the world and thus hot, dry summer weather suits them perfectly. All too often gardeners lose herbs because they don't have good enough drainage (they really do best in a raised bed) or because they don't have them in the right exposure. Most require sun. The mints and a few other herbs grow best in shade or partial shade.

Most herbs are available fresh or dried but remember that fresh herbs have a milder flavor and use roughly one tablespoon of fresh herbs to one teaspoon of dried. Following is a list and description of some commonly used herbs that are adapted for this area:

Basil – *Ocimum basilicum* (Annual) This is one of the easiest of all herbs to grow and is easy to grow from seed. Basil is quite tender so at the first sign of frost you can expect to lose it.

Many varieties and flavors are available. Most common is sweet green basil with fairly large shiny leaves and a strong but sweet flavor. More unusual varieties are lemon, cinnamon, licorice, globe, purple ruffled, Japanese sawtooth, holy, Cuban, and Thai. There is also 'Greek' basil that has tiny green leaves. Not all are used in cooking. Basil is the herb to use in all tomato dishes. Add fresh chopped leaves to vinegar, crushed garlic and olive oil to make an excellent dressing for sliced tomatoes. Add to pork, roast chicken, scrambled eggs, eggplant, mushroom, pasta and squash dishes. It is an essential part of Italian pesto sauce. It is a rather strong herb, but one that is delightful when chopped fine and mixed with butter.

Bay Leaves – *Laurus nobilis* (Perennial) Sweet bay or bay laurel is a Mediterranean tree that can grow in sun or partial shade but needs protection from harsh winter winds. It can be propagated from stem cuttings in late winter. The leaves are shiny, smooth and dark with a strong aromatic scent. It forms part of a classic bouquet garni and is very versatile. Add to stocks when poaching fish, or to marinades, casseroles, soups and stews. It is often used to flavor milk for use in sauces or even custard.

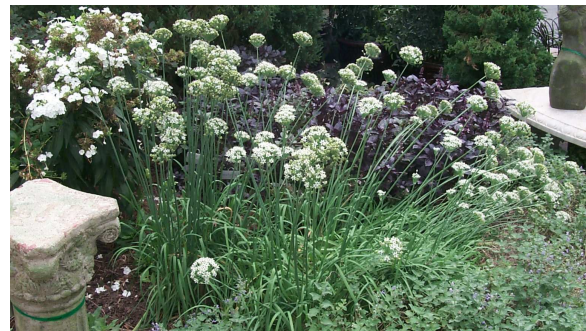
Catnip – *Nepeta mussinii* (Deciduous perennial) Catnip is best grown from transplants. Catnip is one of the mints and is an interesting herb to grow, especially if you have cats. It can affect cats many ways, some love it, some hate it but few ignore it. The cats like to roll all over the catnip as well as any surrounding plants, if you do not want this, you'll probably find it's best to grow this herb in a hanging basket. Although it is sometimes used to make a hot, calming tea for humans, catnip's main attribute seems to be known only to cats.



Chamomile – *Anthemis nobilis* (Annual) Chamomile is an easy plant to grow from seed available at nurseries. Chamomile is loved by butterflies and the fern-like foliage and small daisy-like flowers can attract beneficial insects. This herb makes one of the best of all herbal teas. There are two varieties English and German chamomile. The dried blossoms of either can be used to make tea. You'll need to experiment with the amount you want to use, but try pouring boiling water over about one tablespoon for each cup desired and then filter this through a tea strainer after it has steeped for about ten to fifteen minutes. Add lemon and sweeten with honey to hide the bitter taste. Roman Chamomile is a low growing ground cover.

Chervil – *Anthriscus cerefolium* (Annual) A member of the parsley family and traditionally part of the 'fines herbs' mixture used in French cookery. It prefers partial shade and is cold intolerant so must be replanted annually. It has a delicate fern-like leaf with a mild anise flavor. It is especially good in soups, egg and cheese dishes, or added for flavor to green salad. Use also as a garnishing leaf.

Chives – *Allium schoenoprasum* (Hardy perennial) The smallest member of the onion family, chives have a mild onion flavor, long, spiky, green leaves and are easily grown from seed or transplants. Prefers either sun to partial shade with pink blooms that can attract butterflies. Use almost any way you would onions. Perfect topping with sour cream, cheese or yogurt for baked potatoes. Add chopped chives to cottage cheese, other cheese dishes, omelets, sauces, stews, soups, salad dressings and garnish for almost any dish.



Cilantro/Coriander – *Coriandrum sativum* (Annual) The young plants are called cilantro and the mature plants produce seeds and are used as coriander. Also known as Chinese parsley.



Easily grown from seed; sow seeds every few weeks to have a steady supply of young leaves (cilantro). Has flat feathery leaves and is often confused with flat leafed parsley.

Coriander has a flavor similar to orange and can be used in pastries, sausage, cooked fruit and are an important ingredient in pickling spice and curry powder. Coriander has a distinctive

spicy flavor and is often added to Southern European, Indian and South East Asian dishes. The leaves are chopped and added to curries, stews, soups and marinades.

Cilantro leaves are used in Mexican cooking. Available in the produce section the leaves have a very strong "clean" flavor. Use only young leaves; the older ones are too strong. Often added towards the end of cooking times.

Comfrey- *Symphytum officinale* (Deciduous perennial) Comfrey is a spreading herb with large "donkey-ear" leaves that remind one of green sandpaper. It prefers partial shade to shade. It is widely used as a tea made either from the leaves or from the roots. Be aware it can be harmful if the plant is directly ingested.



Dill – *Anethum graveolens* (Annual) One of the easiest herbs to grow from seed dill is a delicate, feathery herb with an aromatic, sharp but sweet flavor. Prefers sun to partial shade and is cold intolerant so will need to plant annually. Often used in Scandinavian dishes, it is especially good with fish if added to the marinade, cooking liquid or accompanying sauces. Use in pickling; add to cottage or cream cheese, most vegetables, fish, and the dried seed can be added to bread dough for a caraway-like flavor. Add to vinegar used to make salad dressings. The large green caterpillars that love to eat dill will turn into swallowtail butterflies, so plant enough for you and them.



Lemon Balm – *Melissa officinalis* (Deciduous perennial) Lemon balm can be started from seeds, cuttings or roots. It is a member of the mint family and can be a very aggressive plant. Once established, it will spread and self-sow, so give it plenty of room. Because of its extreme vigor, it is probably best to grow this plant in a confined bed area or in containers.

The leaves have a strong lemon odor and make a delightful tea or they can be used to flavor regular teas. It is a good addition to fish.

Marjoram – Sweet marjoram *Origanum Marjorana*, *Marjorana Hortensis*, *Origanum marjorana* (Perennial) Marjoram is a very close relative of oregano, and is a member of the mint family. Marjoram is easily grown from seed. Sow seeds early in the season and cover lightly with soil. They prefer full sun and well-drained soil. They will do well in average soils, and tolerate dry soil conditions; they can grow two to four feet. Water them during dry periods, once every week or two. Do not add fertilizer to this plant, and it will produce stronger flavor.

Harvest leaves at any time after the plant has produced a few dozen leaves. Pick the young, tender leaves, as they are best for flavor. Pick flower bulbs as soon as they appear. The leaves turn bitter after flowers bloom. Marjoram used in cooking for soups, stews, vegetables, stuffings, salads, cheese, eggplant, and meats.

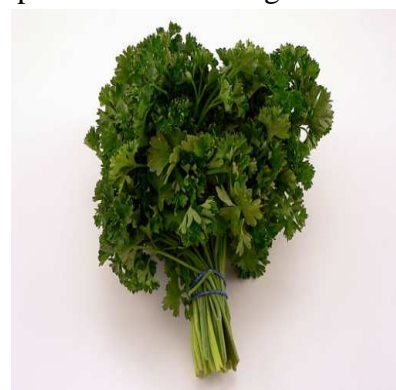
Marjoram and Oregano - These herbs are quite similar, although marjoram is considered the milder of the two. They're both easy to grow and can be used year round. Except in an extreme winter, they look better in the fall and winter than in mid-summer when the growth begins to slow.

Mints – *Mentha* (Perennial) One of the hardiest and easiest herbs to grow from cuttings, roots or transplants. Can be grown from seed, but sometimes difficult. Most mints are tough, hardy plants for this area. Mint plants cross-pollinate easily, so hybrids are common. All mints appreciate moisture and do best where they get afternoon shade. A good place to plant mint is at the base of a downspout. Spearmint is one of the most popular and the easiest to grow and peppermint is more difficult. Mint comes in an almost endless variety of types: peppermint, spearmint, applemint, grapefruit, orange, chocolate, Bergamont mint, pennyroyal curly mint, pineapple mint, etc. Spearmint (named after its spear-shaped leaf) and peppermint are most commonly used as culinary herbs. Use to make hot or cold teas, add to green peas or make a sauce of mint leaves, vinegar and sugar to serve with roast lamb. The peppermint leaf is rarely used in cooking, but the oil is used for making sweets. Mint is a really versatile herb used in a lot of countries, from Middle East salads to British new potatoes to American mint julep cocktails.

Oregano – (Perennial) The name oregano is given to several unrelated plants that share the same or similar flavor. Oregano prefers sun to partial shade. The flavor is similar to marjoram but stronger and the leaves are larger and darker. The most common two in this area is the oregano used in Italian or Greek cooking which is a low spreading plant, *Origanum vulgare*. The other is a bushy shrub we call Mexican oregano, *Lippia graveolens*, or *Lippia palmeri* used in Mexican cooking. It can be used to season all meats, stuffing, stews, soups, spaghetti sauce, salads and tomato based dishes. Oregano is the familiar herb in pizzas and one plant would make a lot of pizzas. Leaves can be dried.

Both are available in local nurseries. Because of its extreme vigor, some feel it is best to grow this plant in a confined bed area or in containers.

Parsley – *Petroselinum crispum* (curly), *Petroselinum neapolitanum* (Italian) (Biennial) Without a doubt the most used and least eaten herb in the world. Millions of pounds are used to garnish everything and promptly thrown away. A shame because parsley is loaded with vitamins and minerals. Parsley comes in two forms, the flat leaved or Italian parsley (which has more flavor), and the curled or French and prefers sun to partial shade. There are many hybrids of each available as seeds or transplants. Seed is slow to germinate, but worth the wait. Parsley can have problems with root maggots in this area. Parsley is a biennial, producing leaves the first year and flowers the next. Not only is parsley a garnish for any dish, it is excellent dipped in a batter and deep-fried. Brown parsley with butter and garlic for a sauce to baste grilled meats. Parsley is an essential part of a bouquet garni. Parsley livens up the most savory dishes and is often used as a garnish, either chopped or as sprigs. Add chopped leaves to salads, soups, sauces and cooked vegetables. In the past it was used as a breath mint.



Rosemary –*Rosmarinus officinalis* (Perennial) A hearty, tough plant that thrives in our hot dry climate. It is an evergreen and has lavender-blue flowers. Available as a landscape plant in nurseries. It is a pungent, fragrant shrub with small, narrow leaves, set densely on the branches. Rosemary comes in many forms from a bush that grows up to four feet tall to a low-growing groundcover variety. One of the oldest herbs known to man and has a long history of uses. There are many varieties and forms, all of which can be used in cooking. Rosemary is a natural for pork, lamb and poultry dishes. Use a branch of Rosemary as a basting brush for barbecued chicken. Place a few leaves on top of roasts or baked chicken. Great in dishes such as 'pasta e fagioli' (soup with pasta and beans) and in vegetable dishes such as ratatouille or added to marinades. Rosemary is a strong herb.

Because of its extreme vigor, some choose to grow this plant in a confined bed area or in containers.



Sage – *Salvia officinalis* (Perennial) This is another herb that doubles as a durable landscape plant in this area and prefers sun to partial shade. Very drought resistant; it can be killed by over watering. Sage is best started from transplants or cuttings, but can be started from seed. A strong flavored herb with narrow, pale gray-green leaves with a rough texture. There are many varieties of sage available, including garden, golden, blue, pineapple, tri-color, and clary. All can be used in cooking. Sage leaves can be dried before using. Sage is a must in stuffing for poultry. Roast it with pork, add to butter and sauté chicken in it and use with any richly flavored meat. Goes well in egg, cheese and tomato dishes. Try a little crumbled dry sage over a bowl of black-eyed peas. Dried leaves will keep their flavor for years

Tarragon – French tarragon- *Artemisia dracunculus* 'Sativa' (Deciduous perennial) Prefers sun to partial shade and does not like to be over watered. One of the classic 'fine herbs', there are two varieties of this herb - French and Russian. French is harder to grow but it has more flavor than the Russian. It has a distinctive flavor and shiny, narrow leaves. It is widely used in vinegars, soups, stuffings, sauces and salad dressings. Also good with roast meat, poultry dishes and fish.



Thyme – *Thyme* (Perennial) Thyme, along with sage, rosemary, marjoram, and oregano should be considered the basics of every herb garden.

With over 400 species available, this herb is another valuable plant to use in beds, rock gardens and as landscape accents. Prefers sun to partial shade. Varieties available locally include common, woolly, "mother-of-thyme", lemon, English, elfin, silver, and golden. Thyme goes well in most meat dishes, poultry, fish, soups and vegetable dishes. Add a pinch of thyme to a tablespoon of honey and add to drained cooked carrots and

onions. Thyme is a key herb used to make Cajun gumbo. This is one of the favorites of the robust herbs and is indispensable to most stocks, sauces, stews and braising. It should be used in a bouquet garni. The small dark green bushy leaves have a strong flavor, so use with care.

Note: *the real dirt* A Gardening Handbook for Parker County details many other herbs that grow well in our area.

Pictures: *The Cilantro, Parsley and Tarragon pictures are from The Texas Cooperative Extension Service. All other pictures are from the Parker County Master Gardener CD from the real dirt: a Garden Handbook for Parker County*