



# Growing Herbs in Louisiana

Louisiana gardeners can successfully grow a wide variety of culinary herbs, although some are not happy with our hot, wet summers. When selecting which herbs you want to grow in your garden, consider what you commonly cook with. Look at the herbs in your kitchen cabinet and start off growing those types of herbs. Be very careful if you decide to grow and use medicinal herbs. Some medicinal herbs can be quite toxic.

## GENERAL CARE

It's generally best to start with transplants. Starting herbs from seeds is possible, but the time to harvest is much longer. In addition, generally, just one or a few plants of each type of herb are all that is needed. There is no use planting a package of 50 seeds when you just need one plant.

Herbs enjoy sun all day, but require at least 4 to 6 hours of direct sun. Many herbs require excellent drainage. Raised beds are a good idea for herb gardens because they provide good drainage during periods of heavy rainfall.

If raised garden beds are not practical and your drainage is poor, try growing herbs in containers. Herbs thrive in gallon-size or larger containers (you may plant several herbs in large containers). Be sure to use a potting soil or potting mix when growing herbs in containers.

Herbs should be fertilized moderately to avoid stimulating lush growth that will be less flavorful. Generally, fertilize herbs with the same products you use for your other plants, but at about half the amount.

Locate your culinary herb growing area as close to the kitchen as possible so they are convenient to use while you are cooking. If you have to walk all the way across the yard to harvest them, they'll likely be under utilized and the herbs will become overgrown and wasted.

## ANNUAL OR PERENNIAL

Herbs are a diverse group of plants that includes both annuals and perennials. Annuals are plants that grow for a single season and then die, and are divided into cool-season annuals and warm-season annuals. Perennial herbs live for several or many years.

## COOL SEASON ANNUAL HERBS

Most cool season herbs can tolerate normal winter freezes and should be seeded or transplanted September through early February. Later in the cool season, in March or early April, plant larger transplants and you can still expect to get acceptable harvests in May or early June. Excellent cool season annual herbs include parsley, cilantro or coriander, chamomile, celery, dill, chicory, fennel, borage, arugula and chervil.

## WARM SEASON ANNUAL HERBS

Warm season annual herbs include basil (in all its myriad forms and flavors), sesame, summer savory and perilla. They can be seeded in pots in February (greenhouse or under lights) and transplanted into the garden as soon as they are big enough after danger of frost is past. Purchased transplants could also be planted from April through early August.

## PERENNIAL HERBS

Some of the perennial herbs that do well here are mints, lemon verbena, lemon balm, rosemary, Mexican tarragon, burnet, sorrel, society garlic, catmint, garlic chives, oregano, monarda, catmint, anise hyssop, mountain mint, French bay, pineapple sage and rue. Most of the perennial herbs are best planted from September through May using transplants available at local nurseries. This allows them to become well established during the less stressful cool season. Mexican tarragon and lemon grass are not as hardy and should be planted from May through August.

Thyme, sage, catnip, and lavender are perennial herbs that require excellent drainage to survive the summer. They may be more successful when grown in containers and placed in a location that gets some shade in the afternoon during the summer. Even grown under good conditions they tend to be short lived and often succumb to root and stem rots in the hot, wet late summer season. Transplants of these herbs may be planted anytime from September to March, but a fall planting is best.

Several perennial herbs that have difficulty surviving our summers are grown here as cool season annuals, and include French tarragon, feverfew, and chamomile (these may be grown from fall to early summer, they quickly succumb when temperatures regularly hit the 90s). All of the herbs in this paragraph do best when planted in fall (October/November).

## HARVESTING AND PRESERVING

Harvest your herbs! That's why you planted them. Herbs should be harvested frequently and regularly. It's important not to deplete all of the plant's foliage when you harvest. Take no more than one-third to one-half of the total foliage at any one time. When harvested regularly herbs are more uniform and compact in size which makes them more attractive as garden plants.

Cooking with fresh herbs is great because the full, rich flavors are at their peak when the herbs are fresh. The flowers of most culinary herbs may also be used as a garnish or to flavor dishes.

Sometimes the herb garden can be too productive. At these times it is important to know how to preserve the extras. Most herbs can be kept for a few days after harvesting with their stems placed in a glass of water, or for a week in plastic bags in the vegetable storage section of your refrigerator (not basil). Ways to preserve them for longer periods are drying and freezing.

If you intend to dry herbs, harvest the stems long enough to easily tie them together. Next, rinse with water and blot dry. Make small bundles of about three to five stems held together with rubber bands, and insert an unbent paper clip or S shaped piece of wire to make a hook. Hang the bundles in a cool, dry place with good air circulation. Do not hang them in a sunny or hot area because they will lose much of their flavorful oils.

Another way to dry herbs is to lay leaves or short sprigs on a cookie sheet lined with paper towels. Place them in a cool, dry, location with good air circulation. Avoid using a warm oven or microwave because the heat will cause the loss of volatile, flavorful oils.

Which ever method you use, when the herbs are thoroughly dry, store them in a tightly sealed container. Label the container with the name of the herb (or herb blend) and the date. You can leave the leaves whole or crumble them to the desired fineness.

To freeze herbs, harvest, rinse and blot dry. Remove leaves from woody stems and chop finely before freezing. Place chopped herbs in a freezer bag spreading them out in a one-half inch layer. This makes it easier to break off usable pieces later on when the herbs are frozen solid. Force out as much air as possible, seal and freeze. Be sure to label the bag with the name of the herb since chopped frozen herbs tend to look the same.