

## Herbs for the Hill Country, Part One What and Why of Herbs



by Carol Seminara, HCMG

Culinary herbs typically use the green, leafy parts. By contrast, spices are seeds, berries, bark, roots or other parts of the plant. Additionally, culinary herbs and spices are distinguished from vegetables or fruits in that they are used in small amounts to provide flavor rather than sustenance. Mediterranean herbs are rewarding to grow: most are drought tolerant and do well in our rocky soil. All, however, require good drainage. Tarragon and thyme, in particular, hate having wet feet. If your soil has a lot of clay, then you need to add organic matter such as compost to amend the soil.

Howard Garrett has a special mix for herb beds. Here's his recipe for 1,000 square feet (that's a plot 10 feet by 10 feet): 80 lbs. lava sand, 50 lbs. corn bran, 40 lbs. Texas green sand, 5 lbs. dry molasses and 3-5 inches finished compost. You can also add 1 inch of earthworm castings.

Herbs can be transplanted all year long. When transplanting during the summer's heat, make certain the root balls are dripping wet. Plant herbs where they can get full sun for at least six hours a day. If you can find a spot with afternoon shade, that's a plus. Most herbs are perennials and therefore need routine watering their first year until well established. It's a good idea to water herbs in the morning and to check the soil moisture daily, especially for herbs grown in pots in the summer. Herbs generally thrive without fertilizers, but a couple of inches of mulch will help protect tender new growth and add humus to the soil. Conversely, use a light hand when mulching rosemary, sage and lavender – no more than an inch.

Common wisdom is to harvest herbs early in the morning, but it's been my experience that many herbs such as rosemary and basil have the highest concentration of oils mid-morning after the sun has warmed them. Either way, wait to harvest your herbs until the plant has enough foliage to maintain growth. You can pick up to 75 per cent of a plant's growth at one time. Harvest herbs before the plant has begun flowering; once flowers appear, leaf production declines.

Store fresh herbs loosely packed in a large, zip-top storage bag in the crisper drawer of the fridge or on a shelf. The drier the leaves are, the longer and fresher they will keep. Herbs stored properly in the fridge should last at least one week. Herbs with tough leaves like rosemary, thyme and sage will keep for two weeks or longer. Cold-sensitive herbs like basil should not be kept in the refrigerator; the leaves turn black at temperatures below 40 degrees F. Instead, store basil sprigs like cut flowers, with stems standing in a glass of water set on a cool kitchen counter.

Shelf life of many herbs is one year but exposure to light, heat, moisture and air can shorten this period. Herb leaves keep their flavor best when stored whole and crushed just before use. When herb seeds are to be used for cooking, store seeds whole and grind them as needed.

Whenever possible, fresh is best. If you must use dried herbs here's the guideline: use one-third as much dried as fresh. If your recipe calls for one tablespoon of fresh oregano, then use only one teaspoon (one third of a tablespoon) dried.



Two of summer's iconic flavors, fresh tomatoes and basil, unite in the classic caprese salad.

Here's a baker's dozen herbs suitable for growing in the Hill Country. Unless otherwise noted, plant in well-drained soil and full sun:

**Basil:** Minty, spicy, sweet or peppery flavor depending on variety. Genovese is most commonly used for pesto. Easy to grow from seed; protect from frost. Pinch off flowers buds to keep plant growing.

**Bay:** 2009 Herb of the Year, member of the laurel family. Protect from freezing; water only when dry.

**Chives:** Mild member of onion family. Beautiful companion plant to roses. Light to moderate water.

**Lavender:** Floral, slightly astringent flavor; related to rosemary. French (province) or Spanish lavender does best in Hill Country.

**Mint:** Peppermint easiest to grow; spearmint most flavorful in cooking. Plant in filtered sun with constant moisture.

**Oregano:** Choose Greek oregano for best flavor when cooking; has peppery, assertive flavor. Requires little water.

**Marjoram,** oregano's milder cousin, has a flavor more delicate with hint of mint and citrus.

**Parsley:** Celery-like flavor; high in vitamin C. Plant transplants (seeds have long germinating period). Larval plant for anise swallowtail butterfly.

**Rosemary:** Piney flavor; use leaves judiciously in cooking. Loves poor, rocky soil, little water.

**Sage:** Camporaceous and slightly bitter; only common sage and pineapple varieties suitable for cooking. Drought tolerant.

**Tarragon:** Flavor has a hint of licorice; essential for béarnaise sauce. Plant only French variety; Russian tarragon has little flavor. Mexican mint marigold, also called Texas tarragon, can be used as a substitute for tarragon.

**Thyme:** Spicy, herbal flavor with over notes of lemon, lavender, etc. Needs more water than rosemary. Good companion with members of the nightshade family: tomatoes, eggplant and potatoes.