

A Garden of Herbal Delights

by Susan Camp

For many gardeners, the first venture into gardening involves growing herbs, perhaps small pots of basil or parsley picked up in the produce department of the local grocery store and placed on a sunny windowsill. Those little green plants may not cost much money, but they entice us into buying more and more until we have to plant an entire herb garden!

What is the seductive power of herbs? Many herbs are quite small and have tiny or nondescript flowers. Their power to attract lies in their fragrances and the myriad colors of their foliage, from silver and misty blue to bright yellow-green. In addition, herbs have been used all over the globe for many centuries to flavor food, purify the air, cure disease, repel insects, dye yarn and fabrics, and provide scents and cosmetics to adorn the body.

Floral designer and garden lecturer Don Haynie spoke recently at a Gloucester County Master Gardener Spring Series Lecture on growing herbs and using them to enhance the landscape. Haynie's comments and his magnificent photographs reminded me of why I have enjoyed growing herbs for over 25 years. Herbs provide pleasure on multiple levels and there are so many varieties to grow.

Many herbs we commonly use are native to Mediterranean countries and require direct sunlight for six to eight hours per day. Some herbs require partial sun for three to six hours per day and some grow best in shaded areas with no more than three hours of filtered sunlight each day. According to the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, the Middle Peninsula and most of Virginia lie within Zone 7. Look for herbs that are labeled as hardy within this zone. If you are not sure about the information on the plant label, contact a Master Gardener for help. The varieties of herbs you decide to plant may dictate the location of your herb garden or bed.

As with any plants, it is wise to be sure you have the appropriate soil composition. Herbs require neutral to slightly alkaline, well-drained soil. They do not like wet feet. If you are going to plant herbs directly into your garden beds, soil testing is a necessity. A soil test kit can be obtained at your local Extension Office. Instructions for obtaining samples and a soil container are included. Return the sample to the Extension Office. The sample will be sent to Virginia Tech for testing, after which you will receive a report that tells you the soil pH (acidity or alkalinity) and the level of various nutrients in your soil so that you can amend it, if necessary. Whether your soil is primarily sand or clay, adding composted manure or compost made from leaves, grass clippings, and other vegetable matter works well to improve soil structure and air and water movement within the soil. Commercially produced compost from a garden center also can be used.

The next step is garden design. This is where the fun starts, because herb gardens lend themselves to themes. Herb gardens can be informal beds with simple rows or groupings, or formal with complex Elizabethan knotwork designs. The choice of herbs may dictate your

design. You can plant a kitchen garden filled with savory culinary herbs, such as garlic (*Allium sativum*), basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), and oregano (*Oreganum vulgare*). An aromatherapy or cosmetic garden might contain lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and rosemary (*Rosemarinus officinalis*).

Herbs long used for medicinal purposes can be grown in a medieval monk's garden, although you should check with your doctor before self-diagnosing and consuming herbal medicinal preparations, as some herbs are toxic. Poisonous herbs should not be planted in a garden where children or pets may play.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), dill (*Anethum graveolens*), and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) attract caterpillars. If you are willing to share your plants with them, you will be rewarded with swallowtail and monarch butterflies. No matter what herbs you plant, bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds will feed in your garden, but you may wish to plant specific herbs to attract them.

Raised beds are an ideal way to grow herbs. Not only do raised beds give your back a break, but they help to protect your plants from rabbits, which enjoy munching on tender, green herbs. Container gardening is another possibility if you have only a small area for planting, or if you wish to have culinary herbs close to your kitchen door. Attractive, fragrant herb plantings can decorate a deck or back porch. Boxes on windows or deck railings are an alternative, although sufficient drainage can be a problem. I found that out the hard way. The opposite problem can occur: herbs in containers can dehydrate quickly in Tidewater summer heat.

Many commercial gardening books and magazines feature herb garden layouts, complete with the varieties and number of plants needed for each section. Again, remember to check zone hardiness and hours of sunlight needed before investing in plants that may not work in your planned space.

Enjoy discovering and planting new varieties of herbs. Harvesting and using your herbs is even more fun than growing them. In future articles we will look at harvesting and preserving herbs and some simple, attractive projects using the herbs you have grown.

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