



Culinary Herbs for Illinois Gardens

James C. Schmidt, Horticulturist
University of Illinois

The most popular herbs among gardeners are those that are used in cooking. Freshly harvested herbs have pungent and aromatic qualities that far exceed those of their commercial counterparts – whether fresh or dried. They can enhance even the simplest meal. Most culinary herbs don't have showy flowers; we rely on the beauty of their leaves, the shape of the plant, and its aromatic scent.

You will enjoy growing herbs because their culture is easy. They require little care and space, have few insect and disease problems, and generally require only moderate fertility levels. Above all, growing herbs provides you with a continuing and satisfying hobby. If you don't have space for an herb garden, consider planting a few culinary herbs in a planter box or tucked among flowers.

Listed here are the most popular culinary herbs grown in Illinois. There are, however, many others that can be grown successfully in our state.

BALM, LEMON (*Melissa officinalis*)

Lemon balm is a hardy perennial that attains a height of 2 feet. It closely resembles the mints in appearance and cultural requirements. The leaves are heart-shaped and light bright green. The flowers are an inconspicuous yellow or white. The entire plant has a strong lemon scent. This herb can be propagated by division made in the spring or early fall. Start plants from cuttings or seed (very slow). Space plants 2 feet apart. Plant lemon balm in a well-drained, partially sunny area. Harvest for drying before the flowering stage; leave 2 to 3 inches of stem above the ground. This is a good plant to add for texture in a border. It is not a good specimen plant because it only looks like a mass of coarse green leaves. Lemon balm is used in herbal teas and as a garnish in iced beverages. You can also add a few leaves to a lettuce or fruit salad for a pleasantly subtle flavor. The dried leaves are added to potpourris; harvest the lower leaves in late summer for best fragrance.

BASIL, SWEET (*Ocimum basilicum*)

Basil is an annual with broad, dark green or purple leaves. The plants reach a height of 12 to 24 inches and produce small, white or pinkish-white flowers in midsummer. There are several varieties of basil that can be successfully grown. These are described here:

- Sweet Basil comes in many types and is the standard basil commonly sold.

- Lettuce-leaf Basil has large, savoyed leaves that look like curly lettuce. These are attractive where the fresh leaves remain to be seen in a finished dish. These can be used like other basil, as a base for salads or as a garnish.
- 'Dark Opal' Basil is a beautiful, rich, wine-red color. It has a bold, heavy taste so it needs to be used differently from other sweet basil. It is a good addition to butters and cream sauces.
- Cinnamon Basil is popular in some oriental cuisines. It has a somewhat cinnamon-like flavor, but it is not too distinct. The plant is beautiful with purple stems and glossy green leaves. If left to flower, it has lovely light purple flowers in terminal clusters.
- Anise Basil looks like cinnamon basil but has an anise or licorice-like flavor.
- Lemon Basil has a very lemony flavor and aroma. It can be used in cooking where a lemon flavor is desired. This plant loves to flower and go to seed, so repeated pinching is essential.
- 'Spicy Globe' – 'Green Bouquet' Basils are two similar small, compact bushy types. They double as attractive edging and culinary plants.
- Green Ruffles Basil has an intensely ruffled surface that is very ornamental. A similar type, 'Purple Ruffles', is a 'Dark Opal' version with the same leaf type. Both of these are less valued as culinary herbs and better used as a garnish.

Sow basil seed in spring as soon as the ground can be worked. Or start with transplants from a garden center; set them out after all danger of frost is past. Space mature plants 8 to 12 inches apart. For fresh use, harvest the leaves 6 weeks after planting or as the leaves mature. To keep a steady supply of new leaves, pinch off the flower spikes just after they form. The leaves dry well either by hang drying or microwave-drying. The crushed leaves of basil have a sweet, anise-like flavor and aroma. They are used to perk up any vegetable, poultry, or meat dish. Basil is also often used in tomato and egg dishes, stews, soups, and salads. It is a principle ingredient of pesto, a green sauce that is added to soups, vegetables, and fish, and to pasta in Mediterranean cooking.

CHIVES (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

Chives are perennial, belonging to the onion family. The small bulbous plants grow in clumps of 6 to 8 inches tall and produce narrow, hollow, somewhat grass-like leaves. In late May to June, the plants produce small, round, attractive lavender-pink flowers. Chives are started from bulbs similar to onion sets, or from seed. You can divide the clumps in early spring, keeping 4 to 6 bulblets for each new start. It is best to divide old clumps every 2 to 3 years to prevent overcrowding. Snip the fresh leaves as needed during the entire growing season. The plants can be cut back several times during the season without harming them. You can dry the stems and flowers for later use; the flowers retain their size and color but lose some of the odor. Though this plant is commonly used as a border plant for an herb garden, it is more interesting to group them in clumps rather than in straight rows. Snipped chive leaves add a mild onion-like flavor to dips, spreads, soups, salads, omelets, casseroles, and most vegetables. The flowers can be used fresh in salads and vinegars

CORIANDER (*Coriandrum sativum*)

This dainty annual that looks somewhat like parsley goes by several names: Chinese parsley, cilantro, and coriander. It grows 1 to 2 feet tall and has young leaves that are oval and toothed, while the mature leaves are feathery. The leaves are pungent, combining the flavors of sage and citrus. The small, pinkish-white flowers occur in flat, umbrella-like clusters at the stem ends. Actually, the term *cilantro* refers to the foliage. *Coriander* refers to the fully ripened seeds, which have a pleasant citrus scent. Coriander prefers full sun and a rich, well-drained soil. Sow the seed 1/2-inch deep in the spring after all danger of frost is past. The seed germinates quickly; thin the seedlings to 6 inches apart. Because the plants flower and set seed in only 9 weeks, make successive plantings every 2 to 3 weeks to ensure a continuous supply. Coriander will reseed itself if the seeds aren't harvested before they drop. It is helpful to stake the stems to prevent them from falling over. If the leaves are to be used, harvest only the younger ones. To harvest the seed, wait until the fruits turn a light brown. Then cut off the entire plant, place in a paper bag, and hang to dry in a warm, dark place. To remove the inner hearts of the seeds, rub the fruit between the palm of your hands. The pods will split in half and release the seeds. Seed that is not thoroughly dry will have a bitter flavor. This herb is used in several international cuisines. The fresh leaves (cilantro) are used in many Mexican, Mediterranean, and Chinese dishes. It is used to flavor salsa, chutneys, and curries. The inner heart of the seed is steeped in water, strained out, and the water used for cooking – primarily in pastries, sausage, cooked fruit, ground meat, and breads. The ground-seed powder is an ingredient of curry. The seeds, whole or crushed, can be added to sachets and potpourris. Since the flavor of the leaves is entirely different from that of the seeds, the two are not interchangeable in recipes.

DILL (*Anethum graveolens*)

The blue-green, feathery foliage of annual dill grows 2 to 4 feet tall and provides a soft, lacy background for some of the smaller herbs. When in flower, the plant supports graceful umbels of tiny yellow blossoms. An All-America Selection 'Fernleaf' produces side shoots through the season and is more compact for the home garden. This easily grown annual can be started from seed. Sow in a well-drained, sunny location and thin the seedlings to 8- to 10-inch spacings. Successive plantings can be made from April through July. Dill will self-sow for the next season if a few plants are left to scatter seeds. The foliage can be dried by hanging the stems upside down. When dry, the foliage is quite brittle but still fragrant. Both the leaves and seeds of dill have many culinary uses. The leaves and umbels of dill are a traditional favorite in pickling, but they can be used with a wide range of foods. Dill leaves provide a pleasantly strong seasoning when chopped into garden salads, cottage cheese, potato salads, meat or fish dishes, soups, stews, and sauces. Add dill seed o breads, omelets, egg salad, baked fish, and legume dishes. To harvest the seed, allow the plant to mature until the seeds ripen to a light brown color. The dried blooms can be used in wreaths, garlands, or potpourris.

LOVAGE (*Levisticum officinale*)

This is a hardy perennial that grows 6 to 7 feet tall. The large, deeply divided leaves resemble celery and have a similar scent. Small yellow flower in flat-topped clusters appear in early spring. This herb reseeds itself readily. Lovage grows best in a rich, moist soil in full sun. Sow seed in the fall, or divide established plants in spring. Space plants 3 feet apart. The leaves are best used when young and tender, but can be harvested anytime before the seed sets. Because of its height, this herb is useful as a background plant for a border. All parts of the plant are edible. The leaves and stems are used as a celery substitute in soups, salads, stews, sauces, and with vegetables and poultry. The stems can also be blanched and served as a vegetable. Try sprinkling the seed over meat, breads, potatoes, or cookies.

MARJORAM, SWEET (*Origanum marjorana*)

Marjoram is a low-spreading perennial with fuzzy, pale green, round 1/2-inch leaves and erect reddish stems. The flower spike is a knot-like cluster of three to five white to pink flowers. The roots of the plant spread to form a dense clump and can become rampant in the garden. It is a tender perennial that often winterkills in Illinois. The plants grow best in rich, moist soil in full sun. Marjoram can be grown from seed, but the seed is slow to germinate. It is best to divide a parent plant, or purchase established plants from a garden center. It will grow in shade but prefers full sun. The soil should be well-drained. The leaves of sweet marjoram are used fresh or dried in salads, egg dishes, soups, stews, marinades, dressings, stuffings, and with vegetables. It combines well with many other herbs and is used with thyme, tarragon, bay, and parsley to make a *bouquet garni*. Perhaps the best use of this herb is to dry the flowerheads for winter arrangements or as a base material for wreaths since the flavor is similar to that of brown paper.

MINT:Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*)

The perennial mints are upright growing plants that reach 2 feet in height. Peppermint has dark green leaves and a reddish stem, while spearmint is lighter green in color with sharply pointed leaves. Both emit a characteristic warm, spicy scent when bruised or crushed. Peppermint flowers are a lavender shade, while spearmint flowers are pink. The mints are easily propagated by division of clumps. True peppermint is sterile and cannot be propagated by seed. The plants send out many runners that can be divided and lifted. It is wise to keep this spreading tendency in check, for the mints may become quite invasive and weedy if left unattended. Try keeping the mints in a separate bed of their own to avoid crowding other herbs. Mints flourish in a moist, partially shaded to sunny location. Space the plants 2 feet apart. Harvest the leaves as needed or cut entire stems 1 inch above the ground just before flowering. You can cut the stems back severely without damaging the plants. The leaves dry easily and retain their fragrance, but they become brittle. The mints are excellent groundcovers due to their tendency to spread. If you keep it mowed, it will form a thick carpet. Fresh mint is added to salads and summer beverages. The dried leaves

make an aromatic tea that is sometimes considered to be an aid to digestion. Spearmint has a slightly milder flavor than peppermint.

OREGANO (*Origanum vulgare*)

This hardy perennial is also referred to as European oregano, wild marjoram, and winter marjoram. It has sprawling stems that reach a height of 3 feet. The leaves are ovate, dark-green, and coarsely pubescent. The flowers are reddish-purple and emerge from loosely clustered buds. This herb will grow in poor soil and can be propagated by means of seed or division. If seed is sown, thin the seedlings to 10 to 12 inches apart. The mature clumps should be divided every 2 to 3 years to renew their vigor because the plants become woody and less flavorful. This type of oregano is best used as a groundcover or rock garden plant, or grown for its flowers, since it is not the best for culinary purposes, having little flavor potential.

OREGANO, GREEK (*Origanum vulgare* var. *hirtum*)

Greek Oregano is a low spreading perennial with fuzzy, pale green, round 1/2 to 1 inch leaves and erect reddish stems. The flower spike is a knot-like cluster but much larger than sweet marjoram. The roots of the plant spread to form a dense clump and can become rampant in the garden. Since oregano doesn't grow "true-to-taste" when grown from seed, start with a plant or rooted cutting to be sure you have one that is aromatic. Space the plants 18 inches apart in any soil. The leaves can be harvested anytime after the plant is 6 inches tall. Cutting off sprigs encourages the plant to become bushier. If the stems are cut down as flowering begins, new shoots will form. This is the best oregano for culinary purposes. This is a major ingredient in Italian and Mexican main courses, as well as in sauces, cocktail dips, cheese and egg dishes, eggplant, and many vegetables.

PARSLEY (*Petroselinum crispum*)

Parsley is one of the most familiar of all herbs. It is a biennial that is usually grown as an annual. The plant produces a rosette of leaves the first year. In the second year, the plant sends up a flower stalk that produces seed, then dies. There are two types – curled and Italian. Curled parsley has crispy, tightly curled foliage. The Italian type (*P. c.* 'Neopolitanum') has broad, flat leaves and a stronger flavor; thus it is considered superior for cooking purposes. Plant the seeds in early spring in medium-rich soil, either in full sun or partial shade. The seed germinates better if it is soaked in water for 24 hours before planting. Parsley can be harvested as soon as the plants are 6 inches tall. Harvest the outer leaves and let the inner leaves develop. The leaves can be stored fresh in a jar in the refrigerator or dried for later use. The green leaves of the curled type can be used in cooking but are primarily used fresh as a garnish. The leaves of the Italian type have a stronger flavor and are used fresh or dried in soups, stews, vegetables, salads, meats, and poultry where a finer flavor is desired.

ROSEMARY (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)

The rosemary plant is a half-hardy perennial evergreen shrub that reaches a height of 2 to 4 feet. The leaves are needle-like, leathery, and dark green with a gray undersurface. The flowers, appearing in spring, are pale lavender blue. The whole plant is very fragrant with its own special and characteristic balsamic smell. Start with plants purchased from a garden center. Rosemary can also be propagated by cuttings that are 4-6 inches long. It can be started from seed but germination is very slow and the plants are slow to develop. Rosemary grows best in a well-drained, sunny area. Keep the soil evenly moist and fertilize very little. In warm climates, rosemary overwinters out-of-doors; in areas where winters are severe, the plants should be taken indoors during the winter. Keep the soil moist. The plants can be set out in the garden the following spring. To dry rosemary, hang long stems in a warm location. Handle carefully, as the leaves tend to fall off easily. This herb is prized for its aromatic foliage that is used in cooking. A fresh sprig of it can add a subtle, rich flavor to chicken, beef, pork, lamb, sauces, stuffings, soups, and bread. The Italians especially favor it in pasta sauces, tomato dishes, and veal recipes. It can be dried, but fresh sprigs are preferable.

SAGE (*Salvia officinalis*)

This shrubby perennial of the mint family, favored for its gray foliage and pungent scent, has oblong, wooly, wrinkled, gray-green leaves. The plants grow to a height of 2 feet and have a tendency to sprawl unless they are kept trimmed. The lilac blue flowers, which usually don't appear until the second season, are produced on terminal spikes. Because of its attractive flowers and foliage, it is a good companion plant to lavender, silver thyme, and lady's mantle. Sage plants can be started from seed, cuttings, or crown divisions. It is easiest to start with established plants from a garden center. Space the plants 18 to 24 inches apart. Harvest the leaves before the plants bloom, or cut the stems 6 to 8 inches long and hang to dry. The leaves dry well by hanging, screen-drying, or in the microwave. Sage does not freeze well; the leaves become mushy when thawed. Sage is well-known as an ingredient in stuffings for poultry, duck, turkey, and goose. It is also used with pork and fish, as well as in soups and salads. The powdered leaves are rubbed on the outside of ham and pork to impart a piquant flavor.

SALAD BURNET (*Poterium sanguisorba*)

Salad burnet is an attractive, bushy perennial that forms a 12-inch basal rosette of leaves and grows 2 feet tall in flower. Its dark green leaves are sharply toothed and have a taste and smell similar to cucumber. The flowers are small, green, and thimble-shaped with reddish-purple stigmas. Salad burnet can be started by seed, division of established plants in the spring, or from plants obtained at a garden center. The seed of salad burnet is slow to

germinate so it must be started indoors several weeks before the last frost. This herb does best in a well-drained soil in full sun. It will tolerate a dry soil, but benefits from supplemental watering during the summer. Harvest the leaves when the plant is 4 inches tall; use only the youngest leaves. Remove the flowers to maintain a compact plant and keep new leaves forming. If flower heads are left on, the plants readily self-sow. In the garden, salad burnet is attractive planted near golden thyme, horehound, or golden oregano. Use the leaves in salads, salad dressings, iced beverages, egg dishes, cottage cheese, vinegar, and as a garnish.

SUMMER SAVORY (*Satureia hortensis*)

This herb is usually preferred over winter savory for cooking because of its milder pepper flavor. This is a compact, bushy annual that grows to 18 inches tall. The 1-inch leaves are aromatic and become tinged reddish-purple in late summer. White to pink flowers are borne in whorls in leaf axils from midsummer to frost. Summer savory prefers a rich, well-drained soil in full sun. It is easily grown from seed, but plants can also be purchased. Space the plants 8 to 10 inches apart. They tend to become top-heavy; therefore stake or brace them. Harvest the tops anytime and dry them in a warm location. Summer savory is used to flavor meats, poultry, fish, soups, stews, stuffings, beans, potatoes, eggs, and sausage.

SAVORY, WINTER (*Satureia montana*)

This type of savory is stronger in flavor than summer savory. It is a perennial that grows 8 to 12 inches tall. The leaves are narrow and stiffer than those of summer savory, and they have a spicy but pine-like scent. Small, purplish-pink flowers are borne along the stems from midsummer to fall. Winter savory can be grown from seed sown directly into a moist, sunny location. Because germination is slow, it is best to start with stem cuttings or established plants from a garden center. Space the plants 10 inches apart. The soil must be well-drained because the plants are susceptible to rot. Harvest the leaves anytime during the growing season. Extend the harvest by regularly cutting back the plants. Use winter savory in the same way as described for summer savory above.

TARRAGON, FRENCH (*Artemisia dracunculus* var. *sativa*)

French tarragon is considered to be one of the truly “fine” herbs. It is a somewhat tender aromatic perennial plant that grows 2 to 3 feet tall, though the stems tend to be floppy giving the plant an unkempt appearance. The leaves are linear, entire, and 1 to 4 inches long. The flowers are tiny, greenish-white or yellowish, and seldom open, except in very warm climates. It is a much-loved culinary herb with a delicate anise or licorice flavor. French tarragon is sometimes confused in catalogs with Russian tarragon (*A. dracunculoides*); this is a larger, rank-growing plant with very few fragrant oils. If you buy tarragon seed, it will be this inferior variety. Since French tarragon cannot be propagated by seed, it must be

reproduced vegetatively. Division of old plants is the preferred method. This is best done in the spring as the new shoots are forming. Cuttings can also be taken, but they are slow to root and is not entirely dependable. Tarragon grows best in a sunny, fertile, well-drained site. Space the plants 2 feet apart. Harvest tarragon in early June to use fresh, and again in August for drying when the plants are less succulent. The fresh herb may contain 10 times the flavor components of the dried product, making it more desirable for cooking. The leaves have a characteristic licorice-like fragrance and flavor. It is essential in tartar sauce and bearnaise sauce, and enhances fish, pork, lamb, game, poultry, and many vegetables. Use with discretion so that it doesn't become overpowering; also, avoid cooking it too long or a bitter flavor will result.

THYME, COMMON (*Thymus vulgaris*)

There are over 20 varieties of this herb, but the most popular and flavorful is this variety. Common thyme is a low-growing, wiry-stemmed perennial that grows 4 to 8 inches tall. The stems are stiff and woody, while the leaves are small, oval, and gray-green. The white-to-purple flowers, borne in clusters, are highly aromatic and loved by bees. Thyme grows best in a light, well-drained soil. New plants should be started every 2 or 3 years because the old ones become too woody and straggly. When the plants are in flower, cut off 5 to 6 inches of the flowering tops and dry them in a well-ventilated place. Common thyme is often grown as an edging plant, groundcover, or in a rock garden. This is also one of the truly "fine" herbs used in French cooking. The warm, clove-like flavor goes well with poultry, fish, stuffings, stews, soups, tomatoes, eggplant, cheese, eggs, and rice.