



## Ornamental Herbs for Illinois Gardens

James C. Schmidt, Horticulturist  
University of Illinois

When most people think of an herb garden, a sea of green is what comes to mind. Unfortunately, most herbs peak in May and June, and become unattractive once summer arrives. There is so much emphasis on the usefulness of herbs that many people don't appreciate how attractive many of them are because of their eye-catching flowers, foliage, or fragrances. They can be grown as accent plants or groundcovers, massed for effect, or grown in combination with other flowers and herbs in borders and rock gardens.

**BASIL, PURPLE** (*Ocimum basilicum* 'Purple Ruffles', 'Dark Opal')

Purple basil is similar to Common or Sweet basil. It is an annual reaching a height of 2 feet. The leaves are purple bronze and may be deeply serrated and ruffled depending on the cultivar. As with common basil, the plant has a characteristic licorice fragrance when bruised or crushed. Sow the seed in spring as soon as the ground can be worked. Transplants are also available at nurseries and garden centers; do not set them out until all danger of frost is past. Space the plants 12 inches apart. The purple foliage combines well with gray, gold, or yellow foliage. Use it with deep golden flowers such as calendula or marigold for contrast. This type of basil is not used as frequently in cooking as the green-leaf types but the leaves can be used to perk up any vegetable, poultry, or meat dish. It can also be used in pesto and makes a beautiful herb vinegar. The leaves can be dried, but they shrink about 50% and turn a purplish brown.

**BEE BALM, BERGAMOT, OSWEGO TEA** (*Monarda didyma*)

Description: Bee balm is a hardy, erect perennial reaching a height of 3 to 4 feet. The flowers are red, pink, white, or violet, and are easily identified by their tubular florets arranged in whorls. The leaves and flowers emit a delightful minty fragrance. The plant spreads rapidly and becomes invasive by forming mats of shallow rhizomes.

Culture: Monarda grows best in a sunny location with moist, well-drained soil. In dry soils, the plants tend to be shorter; in shade, they tend to get floppy and require staking. Space plants 12-15 inches apart. Remove faded flowers to prolong the flowering season. Divide every 2 to 3 years; otherwise, the center dies out while the outer part of the plant is the most vigorous. Powdery mildew is usually a serious problem in midsummer. If left uncontrolled, the plant will be defoliated. Consult your local Extension Service or garden center for control recommendations.

Uses: Monarda is a favorite perennial for a garden. The plant attracts bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies. The flowers can be dried for arrangements and the dried leaves can be added to potpourri. Early settlers in North America discovered Bee Balm where the Oswego Indians used the leaves and flowers to make a delicious soothing and relaxing tea. The dried flowers can be used in potpourris, wreaths, and arrangements.

#### CALENDULA, POT MARIGOLD (*Calendula officinalis*)

Description: A popular annual with a small, compact habit, growing no taller than 18 inches. The leaves are spatula-shaped; the flowers can be single or double, and come in a wide range of colors from creamy yellow to dark orange. Newer cultivars have longer stalks and larger, double flowers, and tend to be more heat resistant. The blossoms close at night, or on dark days. The plants tend to reseed themselves.

Culture: Calendula is very easy to cultivate and does best in a rich, loamy, well-drained soil. Sow the seeds outdoors six weeks before the last frost. Space the plants 18 inches apart. The plants tend to flower best in cool weather. Remove dead flowers to ensure continuous bloom. The flowers retain their color, shape, and strength when dried. The blooms dry well placed face down on a screen.

Uses: A good plant where you want sunny yellow flowers that are good for cutting. Use in mass or drifts with rue or lemon balm. It is also a good companion to other cool season annuals such as snapdragon, lobelia, and sweet alyssum. The plants tend to be too floppy for a formal garden. Fresh flower petals can be sprinkled on salads; dried petals can be added to soups. The flowers dry easily for use in arrangements.

#### CHAMOMILE (*Matricaria recutita*)

Description: A tall, erect, highly aromatic annual reaching a height of 1 to 2 feet. When in flower, the plants are covered with hundreds of 1/2-inch yellow flowers that are conical and hollow in the middle when cut. When the herb is dried, it has a sweet apple scent.

Culture: Chamomile is easily started from seed planted outdoors after all danger of frost is past. It prefers a well-drained soil in full sun. Give the plants room to spread; when overcrowded, the attractive bushy nature is destroyed. If allowed to go to seed, the plants can self-sow.

Uses: This fragrant plant is a good addition to a flower border. Pair it up with blue or violet-colored flowers for a pleasing combination. The dried flowers are used to make a mild tea and as an ingredient in hair products such as cream rinses and shampoos. The flowers should be harvested just as the petals begin to turn back and the flower center begins to brown. They are a nice touch to potpourris, garlands, and wreaths.

## CHIVES, GARLIC (*Allium tuberosum*)

Description: A hardy perennial with flat, green, 1/2-inch wide leaves. This is one of the few herbs that flowers late in the season. Flowers are white and star-like, in umbels, and have a sweet fragrance. The leaves, however, have a pungent, garlic odor. The plant tends to self-sow and can become weedy if the papery seedheads are left to mature and drop their seeds.

Culture: Garlic chives prefer a site with full sun and moist, well-drained soil but is tolerant of any conditions. Start with plants purchased from a garden center. Use them singly or in a small grouping. Space 18 inches apart. Once flowering is finished, remove the faded flowers to prevent seed-set.

Uses: Because of its late flowering, it is a good companion to ornamental grasses, especially *Pennisetum*, and with perennials such as phlox. The leaves have the combined flavors of garlic and chives. Use the snipped leaves in salads, soups, or sauces. The flowers can also be used in flower arrangements or as a garnish. The green seedheads can be used to make garlic vinegar.

## SCENTED GERANIUMS (*Pelargonium* species)

Description: Scented geraniums are tender, shrubby perennials that are grown as annuals in Illinois. They are mostly erect types, growing to 3 feet tall, but there are also some trailing types. The leaves are generally soft and hairy, releasing a distinctive fragrance when crushed or bruised. Although many of them have charming flowers, they are mainly grown for their aromatic foliage. There are numerous fragrances – most fit into rose, mint, fruit/spice, or pungent categories. Some of the more common scented geranium species are described here.

Rose Geranium (*P. graveolens*) has pubescent, deep green leaves that are divided and toothed, with a delicate, spicy rose scent. The rather unshowy flower clusters with 5 to 10 florets each are rose to purple in color. Its leaves are used in jellies, potpourris, cakes, and puddings.

Lemon Geranium (*P. crispum*) grows to a height of 3 feet. It produces 3-lobed, stiff, curly leaves and lilac-pink flowers, and has a light lemon scent.

Apple Geranium (*P. odoratissima*) is one of the most prolific blooming scented geraniums with white, fluffy flowers. The 1- 1/2 foot trailing stems with silky, ruffled leaves is excellent for a hanging basket. The leaves emit a sweet apple scent when crushed.

Peppermint Geranium (*P. tomentosum*) is a wide-spreading perennial that is also excellent for a hanging basket. It grows 1 to 2 feet tall and is best pinched to encourage branching. The leaves are 3 to 5 inches long, heart-shaped, softly hairy above and wooly below, with a strong mint scent. Small white flowers with red centers appear in clusters.

Nutmeg Geranium (*P. x fragrans*) has trailing stems with small gray leaves and white flowers. Perfect for hanging baskets.

Lime Geranium (*P. x nervosum*) produces a bushy, round plant with light green leaves and abundant, showy lavender flowers. Lime-scented.

'Mabel Gray' (*P. 'Mabel Gray'*) is one of the most intensely lemon-scented geraniums. It rarely sets flowers, but they are pink/purple.

Culture: Because geraniums that are grown from seed often don't have the same scent as the parent plant, it is best to start with cuttings rooted in damp sphagnum moss mixed with perlite or vermiculite. Plant geraniums outside after all danger of frost is past in moist, well-drained soil in full sun. Pinch the plants to encourage branching. Since scented geraniums are tender perennials, those that are grown out-of-doors in summer can be potted up in the fall and over-wintered indoors as houseplants.

Uses: Scented geraniums are useful in a flower border, rock garden, or grown in a container. Delightful near a patio where their striking foliage can be appreciated. The trailing types are excellent for hanging baskets; the upright types can be trained into standards. The pungent, spicy aromas make scented geraniums invaluable for potpourris, preserves, desserts, punches, vinegars, teas, and sachets. The leaves lose their color and turn brown when dried, but retain their fragrance.

## HOREHOUND (*Marrubium vulgare*)

Description: This is a spreading perennial growing no more than 2 feet tall. The leaves and stems are wrinkled, grayish-green, and covered with downy white hair. Horehound reseeds itself and can become a pesky weed. Small, white flowers appear along the stems in summer, but only after the plants are 2 years old.

Culture: Sow the seed 1/2-inch deep in a sunny, sandy, dry soil. The plants will tolerate a moist situation. When the seedlings are 5 inches tall, thin them to 12 inches apart. Established plants can be divided in spring. The leaves dry well and remain sturdy. The flowers do not dry very well, but can be pressed.

Uses: This is a good herb for a border or rock garden. The white, wooly stems are a good accent to phlox, feverfew, or chamomile, and make a wonderful companion to blue or purple flowers or foliage. The stems of horehound can be cut and dried for arrangements. They are best cut just as the flower buds form. The plant tends to lose its flavor quickly as it dries. For centuries, horehound was used as a medicine, and more recently in candy and as a tea.

## LAMB'S EAR (*Stachys byzantina*)

Description: A hardy perennial groundcover that grows 6 to 12 inches tall and spreads 24 inches. The stems and leaves are white with a felt-like or velvety texture. The purplish-pink flowers are borne on 4- to 6-inch spikes in early summer. The flowers are not outstanding but some gardeners use them for dried arrangements. Several cultivars exist: one in particular, 'Silver Carpet', is a non-flowering form.

Culture: Lamb's ear requires full sun and a well-drained soil. Excess moisture as well as high humidity causes the leaves to rot. This plant spreads easily but is not invasive. It can be divided in early spring to keep the clumps small. To dry the leaves, spread them out on a screen and turn them every few days. The leaves will curl slightly, but are still attractive. The flower spikes can be dried by harvesting them just as they begin to bloom and hanging them upside down in small bunches.

Uses: This is one of the best perennials for a garden because of its silvery, woolly leaves. It makes an excellent edging plant, accent, or companion to other plants. The pinkish-blue flower spikes combine well with other pink or blue-flowered perennials.

## LAVENDER, ENGLISH (*Lavandula angustifolia*)

Description: Of all the lavenders available, this is the most aromatic and dependable. It is a somewhat woody perennial that grows from 1-1/2 to 3 feet tall. The leaves are narrow, 2 inches long, and pleasing gray-green in color. The flowers form in June and July and are borne on long-stemmed slender spikes. Of the many varieties available, three are suggested: 'Munstead' grows 15 inches tall and has deep lavender flowers; 'Hidcote' grows 12 inches tall and has brilliant purple flowers; 'Jean Davis' grows 18 inches tall and has pink flowers.

Culture: Propagate lavender by means of cuttings or layered divisions of 3-year-old plants. Starting from seed is difficult because of the long time it takes to germinate. Lavender grows best in a dry and well-drained, sunny location and in alkaline soil. Avoid wet, poorly-drained soils that could lead to disease problems. Harvest the flower spikes just as the blooms are opening and air-dry them on a screen or hang in bunches. The blue/purple types dry well; the pink types tend to fade.

Uses: Lavender is grown for its flowers and attractive foliage. It makes a beautiful edging for walks or a flower border, or added to a rock garden and combines beautifully with other silver/gray plants as well as blue, purple, or pink-flowered plants. It has a lovely subtle fragrance and the dried flowers are used in sachets and perfumes to scent closets and drawers. The flowers and leaves can also be used in vinegars and jellies.

## MARJORAM, GOLDEN (*Origanum onites* 'Aureum')

Description: A low-growing, perennial herb with creeping roots and erect, wiry stems that reach a height of 12 inches. The soft leaves are oval and a bright golden color.

Culture: Plant marjoram in dry, well-drained soil in full sun. Plants can be easily started from seed indoors; the seeds germinate in 10 days if kept moist and covered with 1/4-inch of soil. Established plants are also available at garden centers. Space mature plants 12 inches apart. New plants should be started every 3 or 4 years since the old ones become too woody and unkempt.

Uses: The leaves are not as strongly scented as regular marjoram and not as desirable for cooking. This marjoram makes a good contrast with purple foliage plants and is useful as a groundcover in the rock garden or along a sidewalk.

## MINT, PINEAPPLE (*Mentha suaveolens* 'Variegata')

Description: A cultivar of apple mint that grows erect to 1 foot tall. The foliage is round, wooly, and green with cream and white variegations and has a mild pineapple scent. The variegation is variable; some leaves have cream markings all around the edge, others partly, and some without any at all. The flowers are whitish-gray in dense spikes in July to September.

Culture: As with most mints, it will grow anywhere but tolerates drier soil conditions than most. Easily grown in full sun or partial shade. Propagate by division of the established clumps or from plants purchased from a garden center. The plants send out many spreading runners that can be divided and lifted. Frequently cutting the foliage keeps the plants attractive and encourages bushier plants. Since this variety of mint is only partly hardy, it is best to mulch the plants to provide winter protection.

Uses: Pineapple mint makes an attractive, low-growing groundcover, particularly where you want a rampant spreader. The fresh leaves can be chopped and added to salads or fruit.

## NASTURTIUM (*Tropaeolum majus*)

Description: This is a tender annual with round, light green (or variegated) leaves and showy yellow, orange or red flowers. The stems are elongated, giving the plant a spreading habit.

Culture: Because nasturtiums flower less and produce mostly leaves in a rich, moist soil, plant the seed in an unfertile location after danger of frost is past. Although the plants will grow in full sun, it is better to choose a partially shaded spot. Soak the seeds overnight in

water to aid germination. The fresh leaves and flowers can be harvested anytime during the growing season.

Uses: The dwarf, bushy types make colorful edging plants. The entire plant has a spicy, peppery flavor. The leaves, flowers, and stems are commonly used fresh in salads, and the green pods can be pickled and used as a substitute for capers.

#### RUE (*Ruta graveolens*)

Description: The plants are shrubby, semi-evergreen, and grow to 3 feet tall. The most striking features are the blue-green leaves and the yellow flowers that appear in clusters from summer through fall. In addition to several cultivars that have excellent blue-green color, the cultivar 'Variegata' has leaves splashed with white.

Culture: This perennial can be started from seed, or you may prefer to buy plants at a garden center. Rue prefers a well-drained, loamy soil in full sun, although it will tolerate poor soil in light shade. The plants may need pruning in late spring; cut them back to new growth. The yellow flowers can be dried by cutting the stems just as they begin to open and hanging upside down in small bunches. If the flowers are left on the plant, they mature into seedpods that can be harvested just before they open.

Uses: Historically, rue has been used as an antiseptic and disinfectant. Its upright habit makes it an excellent low hedge for the flower border. Combine with blue or purple-flowered plants or with silver/gray-foliaged plants. The flowers can be added to potpourris or used in wreaths and arrangements.

#### SAGE, GOLDEN (*Salvia officinalis* 'Aurea')

Description: A compact, shrubby perennial that grows 18 inches tall. The leaves are elliptical and variegated green and gold.

Culture: Sages prefer full sun and poor, well-drained soil. They do not tolerate overly-wet soils. Start with plants purchased from a garden center and set them out after all danger of frost is past. Trim the plants back in spring to encourage bushy growth. The leaves will lose some of their color when dried.

Uses: A complementary plant to purple, red, or gray foliage. This variety of sage is not used in cooking as common sage is, but can be used nonetheless. The leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season and used fresh or dried for winter.

### SAGE, PURPLE (*Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens')

Description: A compact, shrubby perennial that grows 18 inches tall. The new growth is tinged reddish; the purple coloring is less distinct in older leaves. Bright blue flowers appear in early summer.

Culture: Sages prefer full sun and poor, well-drained soil. They do not tolerate overly-wet soils. Start with plants purchased from a garden center and set them out after all danger of frost is past. Trim the plants back in spring and during the growing season to encourage bushy growth. This variety of sage tends to be somewhat tender and should be given extra winter protection, or over-wintered indoors.

Uses: This is the perfect complement to plants with pink flowers and silver foliage. This variety of sage is not commonly used in cooking as is garden sage, but can be used nonetheless. The leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season and used fresh or dried for winter.

### SAGE, VARIEGATED (*Salvia officinalis* 'Tricolor')

Description: Sage is a shrubby perennial in the mint family. The leaves of this variety are variegated with white, purplish-red, and pink. The plants grow to a height of 2 feet.

Culture: Sages prefer full sun and poor, well-drained soil. They do not tolerate overly-wet soils. Trim back the foliage in spring and during the growing season to keep the plant bushy. This variety of sage tends to be somewhat tender and should be given extra winter protection or over-wintered indoors. The leaves can be dried, but they lose some of their color.

Uses: Use variegated sage as a low hedge or groundcover. Combine it with plants with pink flowers for a striking display. While the leaves are not commonly used in cooking, it is safe to do so.

### THYME, SILVER (*Thymus x citriodorus* 'Argenteus')

Description: Low-growing, wiry-stemmed, woody perennial that grows no more than 8 inches tall. The leaves are small, oval, and olive-green with a silver-white edge. The whole plant has a citrus-like fragrance. The flowers are small, pink, and borne in clusters.

Culture: Thyme grows best in a light, well-drained soil. It can be started from seed but it is more successful to start with established plants from a garden center. Space mature plants 12 inches apart. As the plants mature, the crown dies out leaving the edges most actively growing. They should be cut back regularly to maintain appearance and encourage new

growth. To dry the leaves, harvest them just before the plants bloom. Lay them on a screen to dry.

Uses: Thymes are excellent edging or rock garden plants. Silver thyme looks especially effective if grown among dark rock or near evergreens.

#### WOODRUFF, SWEET (*Galium odoratum*)

Description: Sweet woodruff is a low-growing, pleasant smelling, perennial groundcover that reaches a height of only 8 to 10 inches. The glossy, bright green leaves grow in whorls around the stem. Clusters of white, star-shaped flowers appear at the tips of the stems in early summer and last about a month.

Culture: The seed is slow to germinate, so it is best to divide established plants in spring or fall, or take cuttings from mature plants and root them in a mixture of peat moss and perlite. Space plants 12 inches apart. Sweet woodruff is self-sowing once established and can become a pesky weed.

Uses: This makes an attractive, low-growing groundcover for a shady area, although it cannot handle foot traffic. This herb is mainly used to flavor punches, summer drinks, and May wine. Its hay-like aroma increases as the leaves dry. Harvest the leaves in late spring before blossoms appear; dry them upside down in a dark area.