

GROWING HERBS INDOORS IN WINTER

Why bring herbs indoors in winter?

1. Have culinary herbs available for use all winter.
2. Hardiness. Grow plants that are not hardy outdoors in winter and keep alive for next year.
3. Season extension. Extend the season of cold-sensitive plants, such as basil.
4. Bring fragrance and decoration indoors where it will make you smile!

Why NOT grow herbs in pots?

1. Production of herbs, as for culinary use, is usually less in winter.
2. Requires more time and knowledge than growing them outside in summer.

Which herbs to grow?

As a general rule, the best herbs to grow indoors in winter are the tender perennials (see chart). These are herbs that would ordinarily survive for many years in a mild climate, but cannot survive the harsh winters of Wisconsin. They do not have the hard freezing requirements of hardy perennials (hardy varieties of thyme, lavender, sage, oregano). Tender perennials also do not have the tendency to bloom, set seed, and die, which is the hallmark of the true annuals (basil, dill, cilantro, borage, some fennels). The annuals cannot easily be fooled into living a longer life. [Some hardy perennials, however, can be coaxed to forego their dormancy, or to accept a lesser dormancy of decreased water and fertilizer during the dead of winter indoors.]

Getting herbs through the winter indoors.

Timing. Bring your herbs indoors by Labor Day or soon after, but before the heat comes on in the house. If you wait until late October or even November, the transition from cold and humid outside to warm and dry inside may be too great for the plants to survive.

Wash the plants off with a strong spray of water from the garden hose. This will dislodge dirt and most pests. Let dry in the sun. If you are transplanting out of the garden into a pot, make sure the plant is well hydrated before digging. If the autumn has been very dry, water the plants thoroughly a few days before transplanting and let the soil drain so it is not soggy. Dig carefully to avoid unnecessary injury to roots and put into a large enough pot that the roots are not jammed in. Use a good potting soil and incorporate a slow release fertilizer (see below). We use a mix of 2 parts potting soil, and 1 part soilless mix, plus fertilizer. If the herb requires very dry soil, we add 1 part perlite. Protect the newly transplanted herb from direct sun for a few days while it adjusts to pot life and repairs its damaged roots. If possible, leave the newly potted plant outside for a week or so. Let it adjust to pot life (single whammy) before it has to adjust to house life (double whammy).

Light and heat. Most plants requiring full sun will do fine up against a south window, unless it is shaded from outside. Additional light (fluorescent) will be needed if your house is very dark. Basil requires lots of light and a longer daylength (fluorescent lights on a timer). Fluorescent lights need to be VERY close to the foliage (6-12 inches) to have any impact. If possible, keep plants away from blasts of hot, dry air. Cooler is generally better than warmer, except for basil.

Water and humidity. Learn the specific needs of each herb you are growing. In general, you should water your herbs less frequently from Nov 15 to Feb 15 when light levels are lowest. However, do not allow them to wilt! Place in a sunny or partly sunny location depending on the herb (see chart). Most plants will suffer from the low humidity typical in heated rooms in winter. Therefore, keep the plants in a cool room or humidify the air. DO NOT MIST the plants! This causes such a temporary increase in humidity that it does absolutely no good to the plant, and may actually cause fungal infections. Humidity may be increased easily by placing a pie pan of pebbles under each pot and *almost* covering the stones with water daily. Pot should NOT be sitting in water!

Pot size. Most herbs will produce better and live longer if they have a larger amount of soil. Some need lots of room (rosemary, basil) while others don't mind crowded roots (aloe vera, chives). Check the soil moisture frequently at first. If the pot is too small, the soil will be too hot and too dry much of the time, and the plant may wilt or show nutrient deficiency signs such as yellowing. If the pot is too large and the plant has too much soil it will not be able to transpire away the water quickly enough. The roots will be sitting in water-logged soil, which can lead to root rot. If the soil is constantly wet, back off on the watering, downsize the pot, or add other plants to the pot.

Pests. Another problem facing herbs indoors in winter is insect pests. Pests inadvertently brought indoors on the plants can experience rapid population increase. Natural enemies are usually not present in the house, so the pests do quite well. Plants should be treated with insecticidal soap (such as Safers) as needed for whitefly, aphids, mites, and scale insects. Treat as soon as you notice an infestation. Be sure to follow all directions and precautions on the label! Make sure the soap solution touches the live insects, as it has no residual effect once dry. Dipping the foliage in the solution is preferable to spraying it on (better coverage). Use only rain water, melted snow, or distilled water to mix the soap solution. (The soap is inactivated by the minerals in hard tap water; salt in "softened" water is harmful to the plants.) Rinse the plant in fresh water a day or two after treatment to remove any residue. The soap is not toxic, but some flavor may remain on the leaves for a few days if not rinsed off.

One highly effective method for removing insect pests when you bring your plant indoors is to "denude" your plant. Cut the plant virtually to the ground and remove any green tissue except for a bit of stem. It sounds cruel and heartless, but it works well for plants that regrow quickly. We ALWAYS use this method for mints and fruit sages, which tend to harbor spider mites, powdery mildew, and rust diseases. We often use it for scented geraniums and some oreganos also. Try it! (This method is NOT recommended for rosemary, lavender, and other woody or slow-growing herbs.)

Some plants, most notably rosemary and mint, may develop **powdery mildew** (white talcum-like material on leaves) indoors in winter. Keep an eye out for this and treat immediately. The disease is favored by low light conditions and lack of air circulation, so do not crowd your plants. A small fan on the low setting for a few hours a day may help a great deal. If you catch powdery mildew early on, you can treat twice with the following solution, about 10-14 days apart. Immersion (dipping the foliage in the solution) is better than spraying because the coverage is complete. Symptoms should slowly disappear in the weeks following treatment. If you don't catch it early, discard the plant!

- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 quart water (rain water, snow melt, or distilled water)
- 2-3 drops of liquid soap

Fertilizer. Despite their artificial nature, we are big fans of time release fertilizers, such as Osmocote. These are mineral salts that are incorporated into a substrate and then slowly and passively released based on soil temperature and moisture. Since plant nutrient needs are much less when weather is dry or cold, the amount of fertilizer is automatically corrected for the needs of most plants. This is much better than a "calendar schedule" of applying liquid fertilizers or trying to guesstimate how much organic material to incorporate into the soil for the different kinds of herbs. "Guesstimating" often leads to poor quality or even dead plants in the hands of many gardeners. In general, we incorporate a light amount of a 5-6 month formulation into the soil for plants being grown in winter. This is sufficient to take the plant through the winter until it is time to plant back into the garden or into a larger pot in spring.

Other tips.

1. If you're going to go to the trouble of growing herbs in pots, choose varieties that are especially pleasing to you. Yes, you can grow parsley on the windowsill in winter, but you could buy it in the grocery store and put a gorgeous, fragrant lavender or scented geranium there instead! Instead of the same old varieties of sage or thyme, try a variegated or "flavored" one that may be less hardy (remember, tender perennials do better indoors than hardy perennials) but is more interesting to the eye, nose, or taste buds.
2. Remove all dead leaves that fall onto the soil surface. Prune back HARD any plants that become leggy. Rotate plants frequently so they do not grow one-sided.
3. Trim herbs back frequently. Promotes growth, improves air flow, and removes developing pest problems.

HERBS TO GROW INDOORS IN WINTER

NAME	A,TP,P	S,Pt sh,Sh	Soil/Watering	Size of Pot	Comments
Aloe vera	TP	Pt sh	well drained, DRY	crowded OK	Do not overwater or put in hot sun! May temporarily turn brown when moved to new location. Be patient.
Basil*	A	Sun, HOT	avg soil, moist	large soil volume	Requires long day, strong light; not recommended in winter except small leaf varieties
Bay leaf (sweet bay)	TP	Sun	avg to well drained	medium to large	Easy in winter; control scale insects
Calendula	HA	Sun, Pt sh	avg soil, moist	medium	long blooming
Chives*	P	Pt sh, sun	avg soil, moist	crowded OK	low light requirement; keep moist
Geranium, scented	TP	Sun	avg soil, moist	medium to large	needs frequent water; blooms in late winter; excellent indoors. Fragrant.
Lavender	P, TP	Sun	well drained, moist	medium	tender varieties best for indoors
Lemon eucalyptus	TP	Sun	Avg soil, moist	Large	Keep watered or it will drop leaves. Fragrant!
Lemongrass	TP	Sun, Pt sh	avg soil, moist	large	grow as houseplant in winter OR treat as dormant bulb in cool & dark
Lemon verbena	TP	Sun, pt sh	avg soil, sl dry	medium	goes dormant in winter indoors. Keep dry & hold back fertilizer
Marjoram*	TP	Sun	avg soil, moist	medium	cut back 2 or 3 times in winter
Mints*	P, TP	Pt sh	avg soil, moist	medium	Cut back frequently; keep slightly moist
Oregano*	P, TP	Sun	well drained	crowded OK	Greek (hardy peren) and Italian (tender peren) are best culinary
Parsley*	Bienniel	Pt sh, sun	avg, moist	large soil vol.	Curled or Italian. More soil = more parsley! Keep slightly moist.
Pennyroyal	TP	Sun, Pt sh	avg, moist	hang. basket	Lovely and fragrant; blooms in winter
Rosemary*	TP	Sun	well drained soil but do not let get extremely dry!	large soil vol.	Likes cool, humid, very sunny conditions. Semi-dormant Dec 15-Feb 15. Then fertilize & water more
Sage*	P,TP	Sun	avg to dry soil	medium	Many beautiful tender varieties such as purple, golden, tricolor sages; pineapple and fruit sage bloom in winter
Savory, winter	P	Sun	avg to dry soil	crowded OK	Beautiful, low growing evergreen may bloom in winter
Tarragon	P	Sun	avg soil; moist	medium	Usually goes dormant. Treat like rosemary.
Thyme*	P, TP	Sun	Avg soil, sl. dry	small to medium crowded OK	Tender varieties do well in doors . Creeping thymes, silver edged, lemon thyme excellent

A, annual; HA, hardy annual; TP, tender perennial; P, perennial
S, Sun; Pt sh, part shade, Sh, Shade

*Most popular culinary herbs