

# COMMON HERBS AND THEIR USES

**MEDITERRANEAN HERBS:** Perennial (at least in warmer climates), woody, aromatic; native to rocky, gravelly, or sandy soils; climate and soils similar to chaparral areas of southern California. Leaves silver or grey-green and needle like, leathery, or very small. Grow in full sun.

**Rosemary.** *Rosmarinus officinalis*. Many varieties, most upright, some creeping or sprawling. Height from 1 to 8 feet. Flowers pale or dark blue in winter. Difficult to grow from seed. Cuttings. Tender perennial. Hardy to only +15 or 20 degrees F. Symbol of fidelity and love. Used for poultry, potatoes, breads, cheeses, soups, meats. Medicinal; food preservative; cosmetics & perfumes; aid to memory. Likes cool, humid winter. Useful in landscaping in warmer climates. Nice in pots on the deck. Used in potpourri.

**Lavender.** *Lavandula* spp. and hybrids. Many varieties with great differences in cold hardiness, intensity of flower color, and fragrance. Height 1 to 4 feet. English lavenders (*L. angustifolia* cultivars including “Hidcote”, “Lady”, and “Munstead”) are the most hardy, followed by the lavandins (*L. intermedia* cultivars) “Provence” and “Grosso”. Most fragrant are “Lady” and “Munstead”. Most do not come true from seed. Oils used in cosmetics, perfumes, soaps and other toiletries. Also buds used in baked goods, teas. Used to make “Herbes de Provence” (with thyme, fennel, savory, and rosemary). Widely used in landscaping. In heavy soils, best to “mulch” with about 2 inches of pea gravel around the root crown.

**Thyme.** *Thymus* spp. Many different varieties and species. All are more or less sprawling or creeping subshrubs under one foot in height. Common culinary thymes are varieties of *Thymus vulgaris* and are sold as English, French, or German winter thyme. Not much difference. Others are “flavored” thymes, such as orange, lemon, caraway, nutmeg, lime, and even coconut. Still others are primarily ornamental and have no fragrance: coccineus (red creeping), “alba” (white creeping), and *pseudolanuginosis* (woolly). “Wild” thyme, or Mother of Thyme, is a freely self-seeding, sprawling, pink flowered, rambunctious species with enough flavor to win a place in the culinary garden. Except for Mother of Thyme and some of the *Thymus vulgaris* varieties, thymes must be propagated vegetatively. Very versatile in the kitchen: meats, breads, veggies, beans, potatoes, eggs, pasta. Essential in Italian seasoning.

**“Greek” Oregano.** *Origanum heracleoticum*. Sprawling or creeping early in season; grows more upright (2.5 feet) when blooming. Tiny white flowers. Very hardy. Start from seed or cuttings. Make sure seeds are from a reliable source (not purple flowering *O. vulgare*). Insignificant in landscape. Cut before blooming. Soups, stews, pasta, Italian food, tomatoes, meat, beans. Base for Italian seasoning. “Italian” oregano (*O. majoricum*) is milder and preferred by some for cooking. Best started from cuttings. Many other *Origanums* are primarily ornamental (Kent Beauty); many not hardy in zone 5 (Dittany of Crete).

**Sage.** *Salvia* spp. Many, many different species and varieties. *Salvia officinalis* includes common garden sage (large, grey-green one with blue flowers); dwarf; Berggarten; purple, golden; and tricolor. Common garden sage is the best known and most popular, but dwarf sage and Berggarten sage are also excellent in cooking. All are pungent and are used with meats, dressings, breads, sausages, poultry, beans, and onions. Purple, golden, and tri-color sages are prettier but with slightly inferior flavor and are not as hardy as the above 3 varieties. *Salvia elegans* includes several fruity sages (pineapple, fruity, honey melon, peach pineapple), and they are all tender perennials; used primarily in salads, deserts, and teas. *S. Sclarea* (clary sage) is a biennial with landscaping and medicinal uses. The many varieties of *Salvia nemorosa* are ornamental only (Mainacht, Rose Queen, East Friesland, Blue Queen, and others). Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) is not a sage at all and is strictly ornamental.

Common garden sage may be started from seed. It grows about 3 feet tall and has gorgeous blue flowers that bloom on OLD wood (do not prune hard in spring!). All other varieties must be started vegetatively.

**Sweet Marjoram.** *Origanum majorana*. Tender perennial. NOT “pot marjoram” or “wild marjoram” (useless for cooking!); very small plant (6” x 12”) but very big flavor; excellent for cooking; insignificant in landscape. Easy to grow from seed; winter indoors on windowsill. Harvest when or before in bud. Very versatile culinary herb – goes with everything; slightly sweet. Excellent with eggs, potatoes, vegetables, salads, dressings. Important ingredient in Italian seasoning. Use this herb when you don’t know what herb to use!

**Savory.** *Satureja montana* (winter savory) is a hardy, sprawling sub-shrub less than 12” tall. Slow growing, very flavorful. *S. hortensis* (summer savory) is an annual, milder in flavor but very fast growing, has a softer texture, and may grow up to 2 feet tall. Winter savory is attractive, with its glossy, dark green, tough leaves and tiny star-like white flowers. Use in front of flower border or a hanging basket. Summer savory can be started easily from seed and often self-seeds in the garden. Known in German as “Bohnenkraut”, which means “bean herb”. Goes exceptionally well with green beans and dried bean dishes; also peas, lentils, asparagus, and other veggies; also meats. Used also in Italian seasoning and “Herbes de Provence”.

**ANNUAL HERBS:** Annual; soft, fleshy stems and leaves. Prefer rich, loamy soils; Leaves very green. Will tolerate some shade (except basil).

**Basil.** *Ocimum basilicum*. A member of the mint family. Native to Asia, India, and Africa, but now found world wide. Over 100 varieties. Most common is “Italian” or “sweet” basil; best variety is “Genovese” or “Genoa sweet”. All basil are wonderful when used fresh, but many are also nice dried. Excellent with tomato, cheese, fish, eggs, salad, and pasta.

Basil likes HOT weather. Do not transplant outside until nights are reliably above 50 degrees F (JUNE, NOT MAY). When buds just begin to form, harvest the entire plant down to just a few leaves above the ground. Fertilizer, such as fish emulsion, at this time will help with quick regrowth. Do not refrigerate. May be frozen or dried.

Some basil make great teas: lemon, cinnamon

Some basil used in religious ceremonies: sweet Italian; holy basil

All are attractive in the landscape, but purple basil (purple ruffles or red rubin) are exceptional. Spicy globe and cinnamon basil also very eye-catching.

**Parsley.** *Petroselinum crispum*. Native to North and central Europe. Known for its fresh taste which combats bad breath, even from garlic! Three basic types: curled, flat leaf or Italian, and parsley root (used as a root vegetable). Technically a biennial but not very hardy in Wisconsin. Likes cool weather and will tolerate several degrees of frost in fall. Easy to grow from seed. Soak seeds overnight before planting to hasten germination. Used in salads, sauces, pasta. Also very ornamental. Curled parsley often mixed with annuals, such as marigolds, in the border. Italian parsley resembles the feathery leaves of *Astilbe*.

**Dill.** *Anethum graveolens*. Native to East Asia. Very fast growing; prolific self-seeder. Dill goes to seed very quickly (within weeks of germination). For a steady supply of dill “leaves” one must plant it frequently. Newer variety called “fernleaf” is much shorter and much slower to flower, staying many more weeks in the leaf stage. Fernleaf also has a milder flavor. Seed of both varieties is also used, especially in cheeses, soups and breads. Greens excellent with beans, pickles, potatoes, eggs, salads, veggies, soups, fish, pasta. Not very ornamental.

**Cilantro.** *Coriandrum sativum*. Native to the Middle East. Green plant is called cilantro or Mexican parsley; seed is called coriander. Grows up to 2 feet tall. Likes sun but cool weather. Prolific self seeder. Flavor is a very odd citrus taste, not unlike lemon peel. An acquired taste; use sparingly until you are sure of your audience. Used in fresh salsa and in salads; garnish for Asian soups, sauces, and stir fries. For best results and continuous supply, plant from seed every 3-4 weeks like dill. Not ornamental.

**NORTHERN PERENNIALS:** native to somewhat cooler areas with richer, more loamy soils. Fleshy, green leaves. “early to rise” AND “late to bed”! Tolerate some shade

**Chives.** *Allium schoenoprasum*. Native to Eurasia. Hollow grass-like leaves grow up from small bulb. Mild onion flavor. Beautiful deep rose flowers in spring. Full sun to part shade. Prune back after flowering to remove seed heads and encourage new growth. First to grow in spring, last to die down in fall. *A. tuberosum* (garlic chives) have strap-like leaves and beautiful white flowers in late summer and fall. Mild garlic flavor. Both are prolific self seeders! Excellent in salads, soups, veggies, fish, eggs. Use fresh. Does not dry well.

**Lovage.** *Levisticum officinale*. Native to central Asia. Very underutilized herb! Tastes like celery with a bit of parsley thrown in. Excellent raw in salads of all kinds. Also makes a great soup. Use wherever you would use celery. Use leaves only or peel stem. Huge plant in garden – to 6-7 feet when blooming. Sun or part shade. Cut back before or at bloom to promote new growth. Flowers not particularly attractive but the plant is!

**French Tarragon.** *Artemisia dracunculus*. Native to Siberia. Only one variety good for culinary use. Slowly grows to a large “patch” from which you can make division. Grows to 3 feet tall before blooming. Insignificant flowers. Subtle anise flavor is wonderful with fish, salads, poultry. Sauces; vinegars.

**Mint.** *Mentha spp.* Many different varieties. Peppermint and spearmint are the best well known. Must be propagated vegetatively to keep true flavor. Freely hybridize. Keep varieties separate physically. Grow in pots on the deck or patio where the wonderful fragrances can be enjoyed. Very invasive in garden. Used for tea; baked goods; candies, jellies, sauces, and syrups. Spearmint used with meat and veggies also. Clean, bright taste. Commercially used extensively in chewing gums, toothpastes, mouthwashes. Medicinal.

**MISCELLANEOUS FAVORITES** of Nino. All (except garlic) are tender perennials (bring indoors in winter) and will tolerate some shade.

**Lemongrass.** *Cymbopogon citratus*. Native to SE Asia and Australia. Grass-like tender perennial. Start from stalk. Use fresh; does not dry well. Used extensively in Thai, VietNameese, and Indonesian cooking. Excellent in soups, stir fries, and teas.

**Rose-scented geranium.** *Pelargonium graveolens* “Old fashioned rose”. Native to S. Africa. Used in baked goods, teas, and potpourri.

**Aloe vera.** Daylily family. Native to Africa. Over 500 species! Grows to 24” tall. Easy to start new plants. Requires little water. Gel from cut leaf used on cuts, scrapes, burns, sunburn. Juice is sold as an aid to arthritis sufferers.

**Garlic.** *Allium sativum*. Bulb. Native to central Asia. Herb of the Year for 2004. Excellent raw and cooked with almost any other food. Exceptionally good with onions, rosemary, meat, potatoes, breads, cheeses. Essential ingredient in pesto. Plant in October, harvest in July. Raw garlic has well-documented anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, and anti-viral properties. Widely used in alternative medicine circles.