

Getting Fresh With Herbs

Waco Herb Society member teaches the ways to overcome challenges in growing and cooking organically

By Charlie Sheridan

Gardening is not always easy, says Waco Herb Society member Eolior Yokus, but “you need patience and ingenuity to learn to overcome the challenges to grow our beloved herbs.”

In Central Texas, herbs that grow well are basil, thyme, bay leaf, sage, oregano, chives, dill, parsley, rosemary, lavender, garlic and cilantro.

“Those are the mainstays in our area and, really, the basics of herbs,” Yokus said. “They’re what people like best anyway.”

Herbs are like weeds, Yokus said, and they do not need highly-fertilized soil or take an abundance of water or sun.

“The saying ‘no wet feet’ on herbs means their roots. Don’t let them stand in water. But you do want to plant them in a place that drains well. I plant them in pots, because I can control that easily,” she said.

“In all the books you read they say, ‘This plant loves full sun.’ Oh, they don’t live in Texas. So six hours of full sun is good, especially morning,” Yokus said. “They don’t burn up that way.”

There are many different kinds of herb gardens, from the formal to the more “helter-skelter gardens, like ours down here, where they grow and we let them all be friends in there together,” Yokus said referring to the society’s plot at the Carleen Bright Arboretum.

Of course, herbs are predominately used in cooking. “It adds a little spark to your dish to have a little fresh herb in it,” Yokus said.

The rule of thumb is to use three times as much of the fresh herbs as you would the dried, said Martha Roscher, also an herb society member.

Herbs can be used to give great flavor to main course. Try cooking salmon with a spring of dill or chicken breast with a sprig of rosemary simply placed on top. Or take the tough, woody rosemary stems and use them for skewers on the grill.

For an easy side dish, sliced new potatoes pair nicely with rosemary. Roscher recommends other savory side dishes like cornbread dressing with fresh sage and using lots of fresh herbs in salad dressings, sauces and cheese balls. In addition, herbs can be used to give unique flavor to sweet foods like cookies, cakes, tea breads, scones and in drinks like lemonade with lavender.

Bay leaves are too tough to be eaten, but they give great flavor when dropped in a pot of simmering soup. Just remember to remove before the soup is served, Yokus said.

“These are really simple things that make you look like you really know how to cook,” Roscher said. “And of course the secret to everything you’re cooking is to taste and taste before you serve it to anybody.”

In addition, herbs can be used for decoration and practical household uses. Roscher says she made a wreath out of bay leaves. Bay leaves also can be placed on a pantry shelf to keep bugs away. Lavender’s calming scent can help with sleep. Try this by placing flowers in sachet and tucking under the pillow before bedtime.

When it comes to using herbs, nothing should be wasted, Yokus said. Herbs can be preserved by drying on screen or by hanging upside down, frozen with water in ice cube trays, pickled, preserved in oil or alcohol. Roscher says she recycles glass bottles from herbs purchased at the store to use when storing dried herbs from her own garden.

“Tending a garden, particularly herbs, is a great stress-reliever,” Yokus said. “Herbs can add calmness and serenity to your life by the fragrance, the beauty and the multi-uses of herbs.”

The Waco Herb Society meets at 9:30 a.m., on the 2nd Tuesday of every month, except in January and December, at the Carleen Bright Arboretum in Woodway.



Thirsty herbs getting a nourishing shower of fresh water located in a garden at the 16-acre Carleen Bright Arboretum. Photo by Amber Adamson.