

The Joys of Basil



Basil is a sun-loving annual herb which is used in our kitchens for the wonderful flavors and aromas it imparts to Italian, Mediterranean, Asian, and vegetable recipes. There are over 40 different varieties of basil which can be added to your landscape in decorative mass plantings. Don't limit basil to kitchen use only.

Basil is easy to grow. There are several ways of obtaining basil plants:

- (1) Seeds may be planted indoors 1/8 inch deep, 6 to 8 weeks before setting out. Fluorescent bulbs suspended a few inches above the plants may be needed to provide adequate light for 14 to 16 hours daily. Be careful not to over-water young plants; a fungal disease called damping off may develop and kill the baby plants.
- (2) Seeds may be direct sown into the garden.
- (3) Plants may be purchased from a local garden center or farmer's market.

Choose a location in full sun (6 hours minimum) and out of strong winds. Before setting seeds or plants outside, it is very important to wait until all danger of frost has passed and after the air and ground has warmed. Basil can be hurt if temperatures dip below 50 degrees. Basil does best in moist, well-drained soil. Choose a site not far from the kitchen, so you can easily snip some for pesto, sauce, or salad. Basil will readily grow in pots; make sure to size the pot to the size of the basil variety. A light mulch will discourage weeds and help maintain adequate moisture. Set plants 12 to 24 inches apart.

Pinch back stems to promote bushy, compact growth. Cut no more than one third of the stem at a time, about 1/4 inch above a leaf node. Remove flower spikes to keep plants producing until frost. Flowers are edible and can be added to salads. Avoid over-fertilizing and lush growth as it may reduce the flavor. Depending on the amount of rainfall, water deeply every 7 to 10 days. Do not let plants get drought-stressed. Leaves are best harvested early in the day after dew evaporates and before the hot sun releases volatile oils from the plants.

Basil is generally pest free, but Japanese beetles which may eat some varieties are best controlled by hand picking. Slugs can be controlled by beer traps. Aphids can be washed off with a hose. Deer usually do not like basil. Do not use pesticides, since you will be using the leaves in cooking.

Large basils include 'Genovese', 'Sweet', 'Nufar', 'Mammoth', 'Large Leaf Italian', 'Lettuce Leaf', 'Crispum', and 'Superbo'. They can grow 1.5 to 2.5 feet tall and are ideal for your pesto recipe.

Bush basils are smaller and more compact; some grow only 8 inches tall. They tend to have smaller leaves than the large varieties. These dainty varieties are suited for pots and front of the flower border. Varieties include 'Purple Bush', 'Greek', 'Spicy Globe', 'Green Globe', 'Pistou', and 'Marseilles'. Some have strong flavors and are great for cooking.

Colored basils include 'Purple Ruffles' (All-America winner), 'Rubin', 'Rosie', and 'Osmin'. They are ornamental as well as edible. Try mixing these in the flower bed with pink or purple petunias. Beautifully colored vinegars result with leaves of these types. A few green off-types may sprout from seed and can be discarded.

Basil flavor is not limited to the clove-anise flavor of the large basil. There are 'Anise', 'Cinnamon', 'Lime', 'Licorice', and 'Spice' basil. Lemon flavored basil include 'Lemon', 'Mrs. Burns Lemon', and 'Sweet Dani'. 'Sweet Dani' is an All-America winner, has a strong lemon scent, and is high in essential oils. Basil 'Thai Siam Queen' is another All-American winner. Its purple flower clusters above dark green foliage are beautiful in the garden, and its leaves are delicious. 'African Blue' basil is propagated by cuttings, has an attractive purplish-blue cast, and an unusual sweet camphor flavor.

Check mail order sources and local farmers markets for some unusual basil. Experiment this year and try a few different varieties.

References:

- Basil, An Herb Society of America Fact Sheet, <http://www.herbsociety.org/factsheets/basil.pdf>
- Basil, University of Minnesota Extension, 2011, <http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/horticulture/m1219.html>

- Basil in the Garden, University of Illinois Extension, 2011, http://academics.hamilton.edu/foodforthought/Our_Research_files/herbs.pdf

Happy Gardening, Joe Baltrukonis