

Growing Herbs in Texas

Joseph G. Masabni*

Herbs are plants that are used as flavoring agents. The common herbs used in cooking are referred to as culinary herbs. Mild or savory herbs impart a delicate flavor to foods, and the pungent herbs add zest.

For most herbs, the part of the plant that is used is the leaves; the seeds or roots of some herbs can also be used. Because herbs are used in small amounts, only a few plants are usually needed to provide enough fresh and dried herbs for an entire season.

Herb gardening is popular throughout Texas (Table 1). New enthusiasm for “natural” foods has heightened this interest. In addition, most food recipes can be accentuated with the proper use of culinary herbs.

Although many herbs are used for medicinal or ornamental purposes, this publication deals mainly with culinary herbs used in cooking.

Location

Herbs may be grown in flower beds, in rock gardens as borders, or as corner plantings. Some herbs are annuals, meaning that they grow from seeds and complete their life cycle in 1 year; others are perennials that return year after year.

Annual herbs may be planted in annual flower gardens or in vegetable gardens. Plant perennial herbs at the side of the garden where they will not interfere with next year’s soil preparation.

Many gardeners establish a small herb garden near the home. Generally, a 6- to 10-foot square or rectangular area is sufficient. Circular or free-form designs can also be used. Plant the tallest herbs to the back of the plot.

*Assistant Professor and Extension Horticulturist, The Texas A&M System



Table 1. Statewide production of herbs and acreage by production regions in Texas.

| Crop | Statewide production | | | Acreage by production region | | | | |
|----------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| | Acres | \$ Value per A | Total value (\$x1000) | Lower Valley | Winter garden | Plains region | Far West Texas | Eastern areas |
| Basil | 20 | 4,200 | 84 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| Cilantro | 430 | 4,200 | 1,806 | 400 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| Dill | 220 | 3,000 | 660 | 200 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| Mint | 220 | 3,400 | 748 | 100 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| Parsley, dried | 15 | 2,800 | 42 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Rosemary | 100 | 2,800 | 280 | 0 | 10 | 80 | 0 | 10 |
| Other herbs | 40 | 2,800 | 112 | 10 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| Totals | 1,045 | 3,571 | 3,732 | 710 | 150 | 80 | 0 | 105 |

Smith, D.T. and J.L. Anciso. 2005. The Crops of Texas. Department Technical Report SCS-2005-01. Department of Soil and Crop Sciences. 63 p.

As the garden grows

Care for your herb garden as you would a vegetable or flower garden. Choose a sunny, well-drained location. Apply a balanced fertilizer but do not use too much nitrogen fertilizer. Consult the county Extension office for soil preparation, fertilization and other good garden cultural practices.

Water the herbs as necessary during dry periods. Generally, about 1 inch of water should be added per week if it is not supplied by natural rainfall. Mulch helps conserve soil moisture and reduces weed growth as well. Because mints prefer moist soil, they must be watered often.

Establishing the herb garden

For **annual** and **biennial herbs**, plant the seeds directly in the garden or start them indoors for later transplanting to the garden (Table 2). Obtain seeds from your local garden center or seed catalog, or save the seeds produced by the herb plants for next year's crop.

To save your own seeds, harvest the entire seed head after it has dried on the plant. Then allow the seeds to dry in a cool, dry, protected location. After the seeds are thoroughly dry, thresh them from the heads and discard the trash.

Store the seeds in labeled jars in a dark, cool, dry location. Some herb seeds, such as dill, anise, caraway or coriander, can be used for flavoring.

Perennial herbs (Table 3) can be propagated by division or by cuttings.

Division: Divide the plants every 3 or 4 years in the early spring. Dig up the plants and cut into several sections. Chives, lovage, and tarragon can be propagated by dividing the roots or crowns.

Cuttings: Cut 4- to 6-inch sections of the stem, and root these by placing the cuttings in moist sand in a shady area. Roots should form on these cuttings in 4 to 8 weeks. Herbs such as sage, winter savory, and thyme can be propagated by cuttings.

Apple mint forms runners or stems that run along the ground; these can be easily propagated by covering a portion of the runner and allowing it to form roots.

Harvesting

The leaves of many herbs, such as parsley and chives, can be harvested for fresh seasonings. On these plants, gradually remove some of the leaves as needed, but do not remove all the foliage at one time. With proper care, the plants will produce over a long period. For rosemary and thyme, clip the tops when the plants are in full bloom.

Pests

In general, most herbs have few insect or disease problems. Although most herbs tolerate minor infestations of feeding and chewing insects, do not allow the

insect populations to explode. The feeding/chewing insects include aphids, flea beetles, leafhoppers, mites, thrips, weevils, and wireworms.

Plants outgrow insect feeding or damage if they are growing vigorously and are fertilized and watered properly. Harvest the herbs regularly to help keep insect pressure at a minimum.

Diseases are a more serious problem on herbs because the damage is already at a serious stage once it becomes visible. To reduce disease pressure, plant the herbs in suitable areas with proper air circulation and water drainage. Diseases that affect herbs include damping off, *Alternaria*, *Cercospora*, bacterial leaf blight, southern blight, powdery mildew, and aster yellows.

The most important factor affecting normal growth and development of herbs is weeds. Herbs planted in pots or in a garden should be maintained weed-free all season. This is especially true for annual and herbaceous herbs. Perennial herbs growing as small bushes can tolerate some weed pressure once they are established.

Drying

After harvesting herbs, hang them in loosely tied bundles in a well-ventilated room. You can also spread the branches on a screen or cheesecloth, or spread the herb leaves on flat trays if only the leaves are needed. To keep dust off the herbs, use a cloth or similar protective cover that allows moisture to pass through.

It is generally best to allow the herbs to dry naturally in a cool, dark room rather than use artificial heat. Experts can use artificial heat, but you may lose flavor and quality by trying this drying method.

Storage

When the herbs are thoroughly dry, seal them in airtight containers such as fruit jars. Store them in a cool, dark location. Any sign of moisture accumulating in the jars indicates that the herbs are not thoroughly dry.

Pulverize the flower stalks before putting them in jars. Store the leaves either pulverized or whole, depending on their intended use.

Potted herbs

Some herbs can be planted in pots and grown indoors during the winter. Those best adapted to pot culture are basil, chives, mint, parsley, rosemary, and sweet marjoram.

Either start herbs from seeds indoors or dig up herbs from the garden toward the end of the growing season and place them in pots. Set them in a sunny south window, and care for them as you would houseplants.

Information

Several sources of information are available on herbs. Books on herbs are available at local libraries. Organized groups interested in herbs and their culture and uses include:

- ◆ Herb Society of America: www.herbsociety.org
- ◆ National Herb Day: herbday.org/
- ◆ Herb Association of Texas: texasherbs.org/
- ◆ American Botanical Council: abc.herbalgram.org
- ◆ United Plant Savers: www.unitedplantsavers.org
- ◆ American Herbal Products Association: www.ahpa.org
- ◆ American Herbal Pharmacopoeia: www.herbal-ahp.org

Seeds/plants

Among the many catalog sources are the following firms:

- ◆ Burpee: www.burpee.com
- ◆ Organica Seed: www.organicaseed.com
- ◆ Harris Seeds: www.harriseseeds.com
- ◆ George Park Seed Company: www.parkseed.com
- ◆ Nichols Herb and Rare Seed: www.nicholsgardennursery.com
- ◆ Garden of Herbs: www.gardenherbs.org

Table 2. Annual and biennial herbs. Annuals grow from seeds and complete their life cycle in 1 year. They will be killed by frost and must be started from seed each year. Biennials overwinter the first season and produce seed the second season.





| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|---|---|-----------------|--|---|--|--|
| Angelica (<i>Angelica archangelica</i>) |  | 24–30 | A biennial plant; be careful: it looks much like poisonous water hemlock | Grow divisions in partial shade; space the plants 3 ft apart | Harvest roots in autumn of the first year and dry them immediately | Stems: raw or in salad; leaves: soup, stew, tea, crafts; roots: pharmaceuticals |
| Anise (<i>Pimpinella anisum</i>) |  | 20–24 | Serrated leaves, small white flowers; low-spreading plant, slow-growing annual | Moderately rich soil; likes full sun; space 3–4 in. within row with rows 12–14 in. apart | Harvest when seeds turn brown, or use the leaves while green as needed | Seeds: pastry, candy, cookies, beverage, meat; leaves: soup, salad or garnish |
| Basil (<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>) |  | 20–24 | Leafy, light green foliage; flowers white or lavender; fast-growing annual | Trim often to keep the plants bushy; space 12 in. apart; prefers protected sun, well-drained soils, and raised beds | Harvest leaves when flowering begins; cut plants 4–6 in. above ground | Leaves: soup, stew, omelet, salad, poultry and meat dishes, pasta sauce |
| Borage (<i>Borago officinalis</i>) |  | 20–24 | Coarse, rough, hairy leaves; produces light blue flowers in drooping clusters | Seed directly in early spring in full sun; seeds may germinate slowly; space 12 in. apart; reseeds itself | Harvest the young leaves and dry, or cook fresh like spinach | Leaves: salad, tea; flowers and leaf tips: pickles, soup, stew |

Table 2. Annual and biennial herbs continued.





| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|--|---|-----------------|---|--|--|--|
| Calendula or pot marigold (<i>Calendula officinalis</i>) |  | 12 | Leaves are slightly hairy and arranged in a spiral; flowers range from pastel yellow to deep orange | Start from seed; likes sun or partial shade and rich, well-drained soil; space 12–18 in. apart | Harvest flowers; remove dead flowers to ensure continuous flowering | Flower petals: soup, custard, or rice for coloring; cookies; vinegar |
| Caraway (<i>Carum carvi</i>) 'Biennial' |  | 12–24 | Carrotlike leaf with small, creamy white flowers | Seed directly in spring in full sun; space 6 in. apart; some cultivars are annuals | Harvest leaves when mature; seeds will form midway through second season | Leaves: salad garnish, tea, stew, soup; seeds: bread, cake, soup, sauce, salad; roots can be cooked |
| Chervil (<i>Anthriscus cerefolium</i>) |  | 18 | Similar to parsley with light green lacy leaves; flowers are small white clusters | Sow seed in moist, partial shade; space 6 in. apart; does not transplant well | Harvest mature leaves anytime and dry or use directly for garnishes | Leaves: salad, soup, meat, poultry, garnish, tea, butter |
| Clary sage (<i>Salvia sclarea</i>) |  | 60 | Woolly leaves 4–8 in. long and 2–6 in. wide; flowers appear in clusters on a long spike | A biennial plant, grown from seed; full sun; space 24 in. apart | Harvest leaves as needed; dry with ventilation to avoid blackening | Leaves: omelet, fritter, stew, flavoring of beer and wine |

Table 2. Annual and biennial herbs continued.






| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|---|---|-----------------|--|--|--|---|
| Coriander/ Cilantro (<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>) |  | 36 | Large, coarse plant with white flowers | Sow seeds directly; full sun or partial shade; thin to 10 in. apart | Harvest seeds when they begin to turn brown | Entire plant edible; leaves: stew and sauce; stems: soup and bean flavoring; seeds: crushed for pastry, sauce, pickle, liquor |
| Dill (<i>Anethum graveolens</i>) |  | 24–36 | Tall plant with feathery green leaves; open, umbrella-shaped flower heads | Seed in sun or partial shade; thin to 12 in. apart; if seeds mature and fall, plants will return next year | Harvest mature seed heads before seeds drop; may use small leaves as well | Sprigs of seed heads or seeds: pickle, bread, sauce, meat, salad, vinegar; leaves: sauce, dip, fish, flavoring |
| Edible watercress (<i>Nasturtium microphyllum</i> or <i>N. officinale</i>) |  | 6–8 | Related to garden cress and mustard; tangy, peppery flavor | Seed or transplant in shade; space 3 in. apart; pinch back flowers | Harvest whole plant | Eaten fresh as salad garnish; common in Mediterranean cuisine |
| Endive/Chicory (<i>Cichorium</i> sp.) |  | 12 | Cool-season crop with loose heads; endive has fringed leaves; chicory has curly leaves | Seed in early spring and thin to 15 in. apart | Harvest whole plant | Leaves: salad or by herbalists |
| Fennel (<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>) |  | 36 | Fine feathery leaves with broad, bulblike leaf base | Seed in early spring and thin to 12 in. apart | Harvest leaves when flowering begins; harvest young sprigs, leaves, or seeds | Sprigs: soup; leaves: garnish, fish, cheese spread; seeds: soup, bread, sausage |

Table 2. Annual and biennial herbs continued.




| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|---|--|-----------------|---|---|---|---|
| Parsley (<i>Petroselinum crispum</i>) |  | 5–6 | Curled or plain, dark green leaves | Seed in early spring in full sun; germinate slowly; space 6–8 in. apart transplants are easier to grow; | Harvest mature leaves as needed | Leaves: garnish, tabbouleh salad, stew, soup, sauce, salad dressing |
| Summer savory (<i>Satureja hortensis</i>) |  | 18 | Small, gray-green leaves with purple and white flowers; mild peppery taste | Seed after danger of frost in full sun; space 6–9 in. apart | Harvest leaves when flowering begins; hang in bundles upside down in an airy place; store in airtight container | Leaves: salad, soup, dressing, poultry and meat dishes, tea, butter, vinegar |
| Sweet chamomile (<i>Matricaria recutita</i>) |  | 12–30 | Small, dark green leaves with white flowers; foliage very aromatic to the touch | Plant seed in full sun at 4–6 in. spacing | Harvest leaves and flower heads | Leaves: tea, potpourri, garnish |

Table 3. Perennial herbs. These grow from seed the first year, but grow year after year. Some are propagated by other means. A straw or leaf mulch through the winter is recommended to protect from winter damage.






| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|---|---|-----------------|--|---|---|---|
| Anise hyssop (<i>Agastache foeniculum</i>) |  | 36–60 | Tall, upright plants with angular stems and tooth-edged leaves; flowers usually white or pink | Grow from seed or divisions in sun or partial shade; space 12–24 in. apart | Harvest ripe seeds before seed heads open; store dried seeds in an airtight container | Attracts bees; flowers edible; leaves: flavoring for tea, crafts; seeds: cookies, cakes, and muffins |
| Bee balm (<i>Monarda didyma</i>) |  | 24–30 | Square stems; leaves opposite with reddish veins; rhizomes are invasive and grow in dense clusters | Grow from seed or divisions in sun or partial shade; space 12–15 in. apart; may be difficult to grow in Texas | Harvest leaves in spring or just before flowering in summer for fresh use or for drying | Attracts bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds; leaves: tea (Oswego tea), jelly, soup, stew, and fruit salads; flowers edible; dried flowers: crafts |
| Catnip (<i>Nepeta cataria</i>) |  | 36–48 | Square stems and small, purple flowers | Grow from seed or divisions in full or partial sun; space 12–18 in. apart | Harvest mature leaves and dry | Dried leaves: tea, recreational substance for cats |
| Chives (<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>) or Garlic chives (<i>Allium tuberosum</i>) |  | 12 | Onion-type leaves with blue round flower head | Can be grown in containers or outdoors in spring in sun or partial shade; divide to increase; space 5 in. apart | Clip leaves as needed | Leaves: omelet, salad, soup, sauce, dip, butter; flowers edible; garlic chive is a substitute for garlic flavor |
| Feverfew (<i>Tanacetum parthenium</i>) |  | 24–30 | Small bush with citrus-scented leaves with flowers similar to daisy | Grow from seed or division in full sun or partial shade; space 12 in. apart | Harvest leaves and flowers and dry | Leaves: tea, crafts, dye |

Table 3. Perennial herbs continued.






| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|---|---|-----------------|--|---|--|--|
| Horehound (<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>) |  | 24 | Looks like mint | Grow from seed, cuttings, or divisions in full sun; space 15 in. apart | Harvest and dry leaves at early flowering | Leaves: tea, flavoring in candy, crafts |
| Lavender (<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>) |  | 24–36 | Shrubby evergreen, native to the Mediterranean, with dark green, elongated leaves; leaves and seeds heads are aromatic | Grow from seed or stem cuttings in full sun; space 18 in. apart | Harvest leaves at early flowering; harvest and dry seed head | Leaves: vinegar, jelly, herb pillows, potpourri, lavender oil; seed heads: pillows, potpourri |
| Lemon balm (<i>Melissa officinalis</i>) |  | 24 | Crinkled, dull green leaves with white blossoms; vigorous grower | Prefers full sun, can grow in partial shade; space 12 in. apart | Harvest mature leaves | Leaves: soup, meat, tea, summer drink |
| Lemon verbena (<i>Aloysia triphylla</i>) |  | 24–60 | Shrub with long leaves that smell like lemon at touch; flowers are small and white or purple | Grow from stem cuttings in full sun; space 24 in. apart | Harvest mature leaves | Lemon-flavored leaves: drink, salad, jelly, tea |
| Lovage (<i>Levisticum officinale</i>) |  | 24–36 | Resembles celery and grows 3–9 ft | May start indoors and move to sun or partial shade; space 12–15 in. apart | Harvest leaves early during the first flush of growth | Seeds: bread, butter, cake; tea; leaves: soup, stew, cheese, cookie, chicken dish; roots edible |

Table 3. Perennial herbs continued.












| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|--|---|-----------------|--|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Oregano (<i>Origanum vulgare</i>) |  | 24 | Choose English strains; produces pink flowers | Plant in rich soil on protected site and move to full sun; space 8–10 in. apart | Harvest mature leaves | Leaves: soup, meat (roasts), stew, salad |
| Peppermint (<i>Mentha x piperita</i>) or Spearmint (<i>Mentha spicata</i>) |  | 18–36 | Vigorous bush-type plant with purple flowers | Cuttings and divisions recommended; prefers rich, moist soil; full sun or partial shade; space 8–10 in. apart | Harvest young or mature leaves | Leaves: soup, sauce, tea, jelly; sprigs: tea, sauce, summer drink |
| Pineapple sage (<i>Salvia elegans</i>) |  | 24–36 | Shrub with many erect leafy stems and flowers in autumn; very cold sensitive | Grow stem cuttings in full sun; space 24 in. apart | Harvest mature leaves | Leaves: tea, potpourri, cream cheese, jam, jelly |
| Rosemary (<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>) |  | 36–60 | Dark green foliage with small blue flowers | Start cuttings in early spring in full sun; seeds germinate slowly; space 24 in. apart | Harvest mature leaves | Leaves and sprigs: meat, sauce, soup; dried leaves: sachets to hang in closets with garments |
| Sage (<i>Salvia officinalis</i>) |  | 18–36 | Shrublike plant with gray-green leaves and purple flowers | Plant cuttings in well-drained location; full sun; seeds germinate slowly; space 30 in. apart | Harvest leaves when flowering begins | Leaves: meat, poultry, tea, fish, dressing, stews |
| Salad burnet (<i>Sanguisorba minor</i>) |  | 12 | Plants grow 1 ft tall and 2 ft in diameter; flowers are white to red | Grow from seed or divisions; full sun; prefers well-drained soil; space 18–24 in. apart | Harvest the youngest leaves | Cucumber-flavored leaves: salad, vinegar, butter, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and as garnish |
| Scented geranium (<i>Pelargonium</i> sp.) |  | 12–24 | Erect stems with 5-petaled flowers; leaves on long stalks with light and dark patterns | Grow from stem cuttings in full sun; space 12–24 in. apart | Harvest and dry leaves as needed | Tea, potpourri, jelly, vinegar, dessert |

Table 3. Perennial herbs continued.

| Herb | | Height (inches) | Description | Culture | Harvest | Use |
|---|--|-----------------|---|--|--|--|
| Southernwood (<i>Artemisia abrotanum</i>) |  | 48 | Shrub with gray-green, small, narrow, and feathery leaves; yellow flowers | Grow from stem cuttings or divisions in full sun in well drained soil; space 18 in. apart | Harvest and dry leaves as needed | Leaves: tea, sachet, potpourri |
| Sweet marjoram (<i>Origanum majorana</i>) |  | 8–12 | Fine-textured plant with white flowers | Start seedlings in shade; mature plants will grow in full sun; space 8–10 in. apart | Harvest leaves when flowering begins | Leaves: salad, soup, dressing, tomato sauce |
| Tarragon (<i>Artemisia dracunculus</i>) |  | 24 | Select French tarragon; fine, dark green leaves | Prefers well-drained soils; full sun; grow from divisions or root cuttings; space 12 in. apart | Harvest leaves when flowering begins | Leaves: salad, sauce, egg, vegetable, salad vinegar |
| Thyme (<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>) |  | 8–12 | Narrow, dark green leaves | Start seeds indoors; prefers full sun and well-drained soils; space 10–12 in. apart | Harvest leaves and flower clusters before first flowers open | Leaves: soup, salad, dressing, omelet, gravy, bread, vegetables |

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