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Master Gardener Corner: Growing Herbs Indoors

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Herbs have been cultivated for thousands of years and were valued for religious and medicinal reasons. Herbs have also been used for dyeing fabric, repelling insects, making teas, seasoning food and the occasional craft project. An outdoor herb garden can be of formal design or herbs can be added to the flower bed. They make excellent plants for containers as they generally require minimal water or fertilizer. Grown outdoors, herbs are relatively pest free and wherever they are planted herbs attract beneficial insects, bees and butterflies. Most culinary herbs are Mediterranean in origin, so you need to give them similar conditions whether you are growing them inside or out. If you love to cook with fresh herbs, try a windowsill herb garden this winter.



Basil

Light is the most important element of your indoor herb garden. Herbs require at least six hours of direct sun light. A south facing window or western exposure may supply that, but they will need some supplemental light during our short winter days. Abundant light is required for plants to produce the oils that give herbs their flavor. When using supplemental lighting, place herb plants no closer than five or six inches, but no farther than 15 inches from the light source. If you are growing herbs from seed you can place seedlings under two 40-watt white fluorescent bulbs for 14 to 16 hours. Use a combination of cool and warm bulbs to get a broad light spectrum. Without enough light herbs will be leggy and less flavorful. If all you have is a windowsill, plant your herbs in containers that can easily be rotated so that all sides of the plant receive light and to insure that the plant grows uniformly.

In addition to sunshine, herbs need well-drained soil to grow their best. A potting mix of equal parts sand, commercial potting soil, peat moss and perlite will provide an excellent medium for growing herbs indoors. Use clay pots when potting up your herbs as they are more porous and allow for better soil drainage than plastic pots.

Water-logged soil can be the death of herbs especially in winter. Overwatering can result in root rots. Rosemary does not tolerate overwatering or cold damp soil. Do not water herbs with softened water from a water softener as the high sodium content can harm plants. While herbs appreciate reduced watering during the winter, allowing them to become too dry is also bad. Containers should have a drainage hole for excess water to drain out. Be sure to have some kind of saucer under the pot to catch that water. An unglazed clay saucer will let moisture pass through. Empty any excess water that collects in the saucer so plants aren't standing in it.

Herbs require a balance between a humid environment and adequate air circulation. Providing ample humidity will promote good growth. If you mist your herb plants, skip the rosemary which is prone to mildew. Providing

adequate air flow between your plants helps to decrease the chance of fungal diseases. Operating a small oscillating fan near your plants, for a couple of hours a day, will help your herbs grow stockier and stronger by imitating outdoor conditions.

Indoor herbs prefer daytime temperatures around 65 to 70 degrees F and night time temperatures of 55 to 60 degrees F. If you are growing your herbs on the windowsill, keep the foliage from touching the glass when it is cold outside. While most herbs can survive temperatures that are in the mid to low forties, some cannot. Basil, for example, cannot survive temperatures below 50 degrees F.

Herbs grown indoors will need some fertilizer, but don't overdo it. Feed herbs with a low dose of water-soluble fertilizer every two weeks. Over fertilizing will mean more leaves but may negatively affect the aroma and taste. Soil pH should be between 6 and 7 for most herbs.

Whiteflies, mealybugs, spider mites and aphids are the main indoor pests that may take a liking to your herb plants. If insects do appear, a soapy solution can be used to control most pests. Mix up one to two tablespoons of a mild dishwashing soap to one gallon of warm water. Spray infested plants with this solution once a week as long as pests are visible. Check the plants to make sure that the soap solution does not discolor or otherwise affect the leaves. If this does happen, decrease the amount of soap used. Discontinue use if the leaves still look discolored or abnormal. Rinse leaves off before you use them.

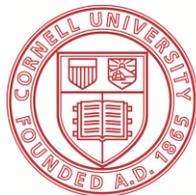


Chives

The most popular reason for growing herbs indoors is to cook with them. Using fresh herbs in your recipes during the winter is a great pick me up. Culinary herbs that grow well indoors with limited space and light include: chives, parsley, mint, thyme, oregano, basil, rosemary and sage. Harvest young, tender stems that have not bloomed for the best flavor. After cutting several stems from your plant, it will regenerate new growth. Fresh herbs are usually added to recipes toward the end of the cooking time to preserve their flavor. Less delicate herbs, such as thyme, oregano and sage, should be added during the last 20 minutes of cooking. When using fresh herbs in a recipe that calls for dried herbs, the general guideline is to use three times the amount of dried herbs indicated.

Having even a small indoor herb garden can provide a much needed breath of summer during the winter months.

Resources: Michigan State University, National Gardening Association, Missouri Botanical Garden, Bonnie Plants, Penn State University and University of Nebraska.



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