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Growing Rosemary Indoors & Outdoors

#V10

If you have sun, you can grow rosemary -- just bring it in when the temperature drops

This aromatic evergreen is an indispensable kitchen herb, it's used as an ornamental element in the garden, and it is used in aromatherapy.

Rosemary is a member of the *Labiatae* or mint family, and it grows as an evergreen perennial shrub in mild-wintered regions of the world. Its Latin name, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, means "dew of the sea," a reference to its Mediterranean roots.

But I don't live in anything like a Mediterranean climate. Here in Michigan, conditions are less than ideal for growing rosemary, but I don't let this deter me. Still, Growing rosemary indoors in the winter can be a challenge. It is easy to nurture and care for indoor rosemary too much. Excess water will damage the roots and cause the plant to die, so I let the soil dry, then water thoroughly. Rosemary needs a southern exposure, and my kitchen window is perfect for this.

Good drainage and full sun keep rosemary thriving

Rosemary is easily grown in a garden with full sunlight (six to eight hours a day) and good drainage; these are the essential requirements. Well-rotted manure added to the garden soil will encourage new growth, but it's not usually necessary.

Because good drainage is so important, lighten up heavy soils prior to planting. When growing rosemary in the ground in southern climates, mulch around the plant to keep the roots cool. Opt for a fast-draining mulch like white sand. If you have mature rosemary plants that have been in the ground for many seasons, you can give them a good feeding in the springtime with a kelp-based liquid fertilizer.

Here in the North, I recommend growing rosemary in a clay pot during the summer and bringing it indoors for the winter. As a matter of fact, in Zones 6 or colder, you must overwinter rosemary indoors. In Minnesota, I have seen rosemary survive to about 25°F without any sign of damage, but I would bring plants in before temperatures get that low.



Bringing rosemary indoors

In the fall, when the temperature dips to 35°F, it's time to bring rosemary indoors. Successfully growing rosemary indoors requires good sunlight -- the more the better -- and ideally a southern exposure. If the plant is large, rotate it weekly so all sides of the plant receive sunlight. Wiry growth often indicates inadequate light, and if you can't increase natural light, consider using artificial light. You can also prune plants to encourage bushiness. Indoor plants sometimes develop powdery mildew because of lack of air circulation. If this occurs, run a small (3-inch) fan for three to four hours a day. I've noticed that the creeping varieties grow and tolerate dry interior air better than the upright varieties.

When rosemary is planted outdoors, insects usually aren't a problem. But in the house, aphids and spider mites are more likely to cause trouble. When this happens, spray rosemary regularly with an insecticidal soap until the plant is again healthy.

Rosemary grows best indoors at cool temperatures, preferably around 60°F. Increased humidity is not recommended because it promotes powdery mildew.

Container gardening is a cinch

Rosemary thrives outdoors in pots, especially in an easterly spot where it gets full sun until midday. If you have all-day sun, make sure the container you're using is large enough that it won't dry out during the day. A good potting soil consists of one part sterilized soil, one part peat moss, and one part perlite. This mix should provide ample drainage. A thin layer of gravel in the bottom of the pot also improves drainage, keeping the roots a little drier during rainy spells.

Because rosemary can be a sculptural plant with an interesting form, I enjoy using it as a specimen. But it also works well planted with other herbs and flowers in containers. I pot it up with curry, society garlic, 'Red Rubin' basil, bay, garden sage, curly parsley, and thyme.

Large pots of rosemary should be transplanted twice a year. When the plant finally gets too big to move to a larger pot, remove it from the pot and shave off about 2 inches of roots and soil from both the outside edge and bottom. When doing this sort of invasive pruning, make sure to cut part of the top of the plant back to compensate for the root pruning. You can then put the plant back into the same pot. Transplanting will stimulate new growth, as will use of an organic fertilizer twice a month.



To keep container-grown rosemary healthy, a once-a-year root and stem pruning is called for. After cutting back, you can repot it into the same container. Replenish the pot with new soil.