



## Growing Herbs from Seed

Every home with a kitchen should have a kitchen herb garden. Why? Because using fresh herbs from your garden, rather than dried herbs from a jar, will liven up your meals and rejuvenate your palate. With just a handful of exceptions (noted below), herbs are satisfying garden plants that can be started from seed.

Now is the time to start planning your herb garden. Begin by answering two questions:

1. What are your favorite culinary herbs? And
2. Will your garden be in containers, or in the ground?



**Annual and biennial herbs**, such as basil, parsley, and cilantro, will reward you with a good crop the same year you sow the seeds. **Perennial herbs** may take a little longer. Container-grown herbs offer the advantage of portability: when the weather gets cold, you can move them inside to a sunny windowsill or sunroom and continue to harvest.

### Five Quick and Easy Annual Herbs

**Basil**, the classic pesto ingredient, is an annual herb that should be started at about the same time you start tomatoes, that is, when night temperatures are consistently above 50°F. There are so many varieties of basil that you can fill your garden with it alone—not a bad idea, actually. Lemon basil, lime basil, cinnamon basil, and anise basil have distinct flavors. Dwarf basil, such as boxwood basil or ‘Spicy Globe’ basil have tight, mounded habits and can function as a low hedge or a rounded pot-herb. Purple-leaf basil has, obviously, purple leaves, which makes them a good choice for mixing in a flower border.

**When to start:** Sow when danger of frost has passed.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun, in fertile soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with ½ inch of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture.

**Container growing:** Tall varieties require a large, 10-12-inch diameter minimum, pot. Dwarf types will do well in an 8-inch pot.

**Harvesting:** Clip leaves weekly throughout the season to keep plants from developing flowers.



**Hint:** You can rejuvenate tall basil plants by cutting them back by about one-third in mid-season.

**Cilantro** is a cool season annual herb with myriad uses. It can be added to pestos and chutneys, combined with lime in rice and chicken dishes, slipped into grilled cheese sandwiches, green salads, or black bean soups. And it is easy to grow! Sow in a large pot or directly in the ground in spring or late summer. In mild-winter climates it can be grown throughout the winter.

**When to start:** Sow repeatedly starting in mid-spring, and again in late summer.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun or part shade, in fertile soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with ½ inch of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture.

**Container growing:** For a good harvest, start seeds in a large pot. You can use the same pot for a hot-weather plant, such as a pepper, eggplant, or annual flower, after the cilantro is harvested.

**Harvesting:** When the plant is a foot in height or taller, cut it down to about 2 inches. If the weather remains cool it will send up new growth.



**Hint:** Cilantro flowers attract beneficial insects. The seed of the plant, called coriander, is also a tasty edible herb.

**Dill** grows lush and tall in the right conditions—cool air with plenty of moisture. Its fresh taste can be enjoyed with fish, potatoes, cucumbers, dips, omelets, and many other foods. And the difference between fresh and dried

dill is like night and day! It is best sown in the ground, rather than in a container; its flowers make a beautiful addition to the garden.

**When to start:** Sow repeatedly starting in mid-spring, and again in late summer.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun or part shade, in fertile soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture.

**Harvesting:** When the plant is a foot in height or taller, cut it down to about 2 inches. If the weather remains cool it will send up new growth.



**Hint:** Dill flowers stand tall and add a nice chartreuse blush to the garden. They also attract beneficial insects.

**Parsley** is a biennial herb. That's a *good* thing—it means the plant will generate leaves all summer. In its second year, parsley will produce flowers and seeds but few leaves. Treat it as an annual and grow new plants every year.

**When to start:** Sow in late spring.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun or part shade, in deep, fertile soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with a dusting of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture.

**Container growing:** Parsley is productive and attractive in containers, alone or combined with flowering plants. For a good crop, use an 8-inch or larger pot.

**Harvesting:** Wait until the plant is growing robustly before harvesting, then cut leaves as you need them. It's best to harvest no more than a third of the plant at one cutting.



**Hint:** Parsley can take two weeks or more to germinate, and is especially slow when soil is cold. Wait until night temperatures warm to about 50°F, and keep the seedbed consistently moist until seedlings appear.

**Chervil** has a subtle anise taste that is wonderful in sauces, dips, rice dishes, eggs, or salads. Like cilantro, it is strictly a cool-season annual; crops can be grown in spring and again in fall. In mild-winter climates it can be grown throughout the winter. Sow in a large pot or directly in the ground in spring or late summer

**When to start:** Sow repeatedly in spring, and again in late summer into fall.

**Where to plant:** Plant in part shade, in fertile soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with a dusting of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture.

**Container growing:** Chervil's delicate beauty lends itself to container growing. Sow seeds in a large pot—10-inch or larger diameter. Use the same pot for a hot-weather plant, such as a pepper, eggplant, or annual flower, after the cilantro is harvested.

**Harvesting:** When the plant is about 6 inches high, cut leaves as you need them.



*Hint:* Chervil imparts a subtle anise flavor. Its flowers are lovely, and attract beneficial insects.

Other easy annual and biennial herbs that can be sown directly in the soil are Summer Savory, Borage, and Angelica.

### **Five Easy-to-grow Perennial Herbs**

**Lemon Balm** is an easy care member of the mint family. Unlike many mints, this lemon-scented herb does not send out root runners, but forms clumps that can expand to impressive proportions in a matter of weeks. Fresh or dried lemon balm leaves make a refreshing tea, and fresh sprigs can be used to garnish drinks, salads, and main dishes.

**When to start:** Sow the tiny seeds in spring or fall.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun to part shade, in fertile soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with a dusting of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture.

**Container growing:** Lemon balm flourishes in a large container, at least 12 inches in diameter. Keep in mind that plants will require frequent watering as the season progresses—the bigger the pot, the less often you will have to water.

**Harvesting:** Harvest the top leaves often for a continual supply.



**Hint:** Lemon balm self sows freely. Clip flowers before they go to seed to prevent it from becoming a weed. Flowers attract beneficial insects.

**Winter Savory** is a go-with-anything herb. Use it to flavor vinegars and butters, vegetable and meat dishes, soups and sauces. Hardy to zone 5, it thrives in full sun and dry, well-drained soil.

**When to start:** Sow the tiny seeds indoors in early to mid-spring. Move outside after danger of frost.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun to part shade, in fertile, well-drained soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with a dusting of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture until seeds germinate.

**Container growing:** Winter savory is a compact plant, well suited for container growing. Sprinkle seeds into an 8-inch or larger pot, and when plants have several sets of leaves, thin all but the three strongest seedlings.

**Harvesting:** Harvest leaves before the plants starts flowering. Use fresh, or hang upside down in a dark, well-ventilated space to dry.



**Hint:** Winter savory can be pruned to form a low-growing, aromatic hedge for the herb garden.

**Thyme** will take more than a year to reach harvestable size, but don't let that deter you. Sow the dust-like seeds indoors in spring. When seedlings are big enough to handle, transfer them to individual pots. Thyme is excellent fresh or dried in vegetable or meat dishes, sauces, stews, and rice dishes. It is so versatile, in fact, that it goes with most anything.

**When to start:** Sow the tiny seeds in early to mid spring indoors. Move outside after danger of frost.

**Where to plant:** Plant seedlings in full sun in well-drained soil. Thyme does not thrive in clay soils. Amend heavy soils with compost, or plant in raised beds.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with a dusting of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture until seeds germinate.

**Container growing:** Thyme can be combined with other herbs, such as sage, rosemary, and chives, in a mixed container herb garden. Good drainage is essential.

**Harvesting:** Harvest leaves continually through the summer and into fall. In mild-winter areas, thyme can be harvested through the winter.



**Hint:** Hang bundles of thyme in a well-ventilated, preferably dark, space to dry for use in the off-season.

**Chives** grow easily from seed. Get a head start by sowing the seed indoors about a month before you plan to set them out. Use them fresh to liven up salads and dressing, or garnish eggs, soups, and fish.

**When to start:** Sow seeds in early to mid spring indoors and move seedlings outside in late spring, or direct sow after danger of frost has passed.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun in fertile, well-drained soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture until seeds germinate.

**Container growing:** Chives is an excellent container plant. For a mixed container, combine it with other herbs, such as sage, rosemary, and thyme, in a large pot. Good drainage is essential.

**Harvesting:** Cut chives to about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch above soil level. Do not harvest the entire plant at one time; it will need some green leaves to renew itself.



**Hint:** Chives are best used fresh, but if you like to save herbs for the off-season, chop the leaves and freeze them in water in ice cube trays.

**Oregano** is a must-have herb if you like tomato sauces and pizza. It is easy to grow from seed, relatively pest free, very drought tolerant, and a big attractant to pollinators when in bloom.

**When to start:** Sow seeds indoors about 6 weeks prior to your last frost and transplant outside in late spring, or sow directly outdoors after danger of frost.

**Where to plant:** Plant in full sun in well-drained soil.

**Planting depth:** Cover seeds with a dusting of soil.

**Care:** Provide consistent moisture until seeds germinate.

**Container growing:** Oregano does well in containers, provided they are roomy enough. Use a 10-inch diameter or larger pot, and a well-draining soil mix.

**Harvesting:** Wait until the plant is about 5 inches tall, and then cut oregano sprigs regularly to ensure continuous production of new leaves. Use fresh, or hang upside down in a dark, well-ventilated space to dry.



**Hint:** There is oregano, and there is oregano. For the most intense flavor, look for the variety commonly known as Greek oregano, *Origanum vulgare hirtum*.

Other perennial herbs that can be grown from seed are Marjoram, Fennel, Sage, Chamomile, and Rosemary.

Note: The following herbs should *not* be grown from seed, either because they are propagated from rootstock or cuttings or seed-grown plants are inconsistent in flavor: French Tarragon, Lemon Verbena, Lemon Thyme, and Mint.