



# HERB GARDEN GUIDE

**COUNTRYSIDE**  
& Small Stock Journal

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**GAIL REYNOLDS**  
**Timberlakes Farm**

**A**s a child, I first became acquainted with herbs by Grandmother — a Russian immigrant, who both grew and foraged from the wild, a handful of herbs that she religiously used in the cooking of her old world recipes, as well as in teas for various common health remedies. Later, as a city-dwelling single working mom of two, some 30 years ago, I began my relationship with *Countryside* magazine ... a publication which gave me the impetus and courage to attempt (even in the urban environment and in spite of the complications of single parenthood) to create a healthy lifestyle for our family of three ... a major part of which evolved around herbs.

After a subsequent move to the country and years of growing, studying and experimenting with herbs, I now find myself handsomely augmenting our homestead income through the teaching of growing, crafting and cooking the herbs, as well as from the small-scale production and marketing of fresh-cut herbs to local restaurants, and (in a packaged form) through small area grocery chains.

All things coming full circle, it's time for me to give back and share through the pages of *Countryside* the secret herbal pleasures and experiences I've uncovered over the years, and any knowledge and tips I've gained (through both my mistakes and modicum of successes) and those I continue to unravel and learn along my way.

### **Getting Started**

Probably the two most difficult things you need to accomplish in this relatively toil-free endeavor are deciding what herbs you want to grow, and where you want to grow them.

The decision as to what herbs to grow is a personal one, and sometimes dependent upon the amount of growing area to be devoted to them. Herbs do not require a lot of space and seemingly both thrive when, and prefer to be (with only a few exceptions), close to one another — grown in overlapping clusters, rather than traditional rows.

They can be planted in border-fashion around your home and produce quite well in wooden planter windowsill boxes. In fact, one year I harvested a family's year supply of the traditional 10 culinary varieties (plus produced 100 bottles of herb vinegars — for sale) from herbs grown in three 1' x 3' wooden planters set out on my front porch.

For the traditional back-door kitchen herb patch, I would recommend a bed (no matter how wide) about 2-1/2 to 3 feet deep so that all herbs from front to back can be worked and harvested without a backache and without having to step into the bed.

A patch 6' x 3' worked well for me. Then, as my interest grew, rather than enlarging the existing bed, I simply created another (same size and dimension) which I placed parallel to the first — leaving a reasonable “knee space” between the two beds.

Remember these simple garden plot preparation tips when planting herbs:

**SUN:** While all reliable books, seed catalogues, and seed packets advise full sun for most herbs, I have found that my herbs literally thrive in partial shade. In fact, late afternoon and early evening sun have been their favorites. Plus, since these puppies do require water from time to time, you'll notice when they're not in full sun, you'll lessen, reduce, or completely avoid those “water or watch die” emergencies that crop up.

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**SOIL:** Ideally, most herbs prefer a light, open, humusy loam (ordinary garden soil with some organic compost mixed in) that is able to retain moisture, but has good drainage, on the slightly acidic to neutral side. While I have found herbs to be most forgiving and tolerant of even the most horrible conditions, wet feet is something they find intolerable — especially sage and oregano. (In fact, when we first planted rows for our commercial herbs, we lost approximately half of our 500 plants—located at the bottom of a bottled downslope — because of this). In the planter boxes, make sure you have drainage holes in the bottom, and that you “bottom” your bed with a layer of creek gravel, small rocks, broken pottery... whatever. In your ground beds, mix in some peat-based potting mix, or grab some sawdust or wood chips from the winter wood pile, or handfuls of dried leaves.

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**MULCH:** Place a layer of mulch around the bases and between each plant. Continue to do this through the season, as the need arises. Straw is good; newspaper is fine; a layer of newspaper with straw on top is the best of both worlds. This mulching will serve two purposes, for which you'll forever be thankful: (1) deters weeds; (2) retains moisture.

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**WATER:** Herbs require less watering than you might suspect—and far less than your ordinary garden produce. The best advice I could share would be this: if the foliage of your herbs looks, feels and smells perky (no matter the surface heat outside); and you can poke your finger into the soil next to the root and feel moisture—all is okay in the herb world.

A light sprinkling (except after a big rain) never hurts anything and enough to moisten your mulch layer is about right.

When your mulch is dry, your soil-finger poking reveals dwindling moisture, and your leaves have a drab color, or act like they are thinking about curling at the edges—time to water big-time! If your herb leaves are in fact curling, and are dry—it's an emergency, and once you get a feel for herb land, not one that's likely to repeat itself too often.

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**SELECTION:** For an all-around starter patch, I would recommend these “can't go wrong” herbs:

**Perennials:** Chives, sage (Clary), thyme (German Winter), oregano (Greek), salad burnet, tarragon (French), savory (Winter), lemon verbena, mint (Georgia Apple), and leaf fennel.

**Annuals:** Basil (Genovese) and parsley (Forest Green).

## Seeds and Starting Seeds

Of the 12 herbs mentioned above, only chives and fennel are actual shoo-ins for outdoor seeding, and both varieties can be sewn in early spring. The rest should probably be placed as plants (after the last frost) into your herb garden for best results.

When it comes to the questions of whether to start with seeds or starter plants, unless you have a greenhouse set-up, or have a pretty good handle on an indoors method, I'd vote for starter plants this first time around.

Before we had our greenhouse, I personally met with dismal failure and major disappointment attempting to start seeds inside my home, and to me it also came down to economics:

A packet of seeds is about \$1. Since I'd only be using a few plants from my seed packet anyway and the nurseries were set up to handle seedlings, I'd prefer to pay them a dollar for their expertise, rather than throw away a dollar on my lack of it. If you do your own indoor or greenhouse seeding, a good rule of thumb is to begin the process about eight weeks before the date of the last expected frost in your area.

*Starter plants:* For the 3' x 6' herb patch mentioned above, I would purchase six plants of each herb. For the planter box gardens, I would purchase three plants of each herb.

*Root divisions* (gifts from good neighbors): You can realize a major savings and enjoy a healthier, more robust first-year herb patch if you are able to obtain some plants or plant-clumps from a neighbor or friend and then take root divisions from them. This fairly simple method is one I prefer and employ frequently in our large commercial patch.

Simply take the plant (or clump), shake off any excess soil, and tear apart at the roots, dividing the "other" plant into several. Plunge these into your soil, making sure they are well watered at the time, and it never hurts to add some fertilizer to your water if you have some around, to prevent shock and give the new baby plant a boost.

A good organic fertilizer is a homemade concoction made by steeping two tablespoons of dried dill seeds into four cups of boiling water.

*Design:* In a 3' x 6' kitchen garden patch, set your plants five to six inches apart (widthwise, beginning with the front row); then, set your rows (front to back) six inches apart as well.

In the first, third, and fifth rows, place your first plant just at the left edge of your plot. For the second, fourth, and sixth rows, begin your planting about three inches in from the left edge. This will create a more staggered visual effect and allow each plant more root space, as well.

*Front row:* thyme and winter savory (alternate plants)

*Second row:* parsley and chives (alternate)

*Third row:* mint and salad burnet (alternate)

*Fourth row:* basil and sage (alternate)

*Back row:* fennel and oregano (alternate)

If you are direct-seeding fennel and chives, seed the entire row at the outset of early spring, then after danger of frost, plug in the companion plant at 12-inch intervals.

If you should choose the planter-box design, then plant three plants of each variety — 12 total — in each of the three boxes. Using the row-chart above, take two rows at a time (in their order) and place plants about five inches apart.

From here on in, water when you feel the need; cultivate and weed around the bottom of each plant when you're in the mood; fertilize about once a month; mulch whenever you see weeds poking through, and relax and enjoy the beauty, aroma, harvest, and sheer reverie of what you have created!



# Planting & Storing Your Culinary Treasures

**Gail Reynolds, Timberlakes Farm**

**P**erusing the seed catalogues and preparing for spring. It's that time of year, and not a bad pastime while warding off the ills and chills of "cabin fever."

Whether your attraction to herbs stems from an interest in cooking, a desire for a fun and rewarding hobby, or taking a stab at a home business opportunity, some knowledge about the mainstay culinary herbs may assist you in planning for the upcoming season.

Let's review them, and I'll share some tips I've picked up along the way.



## BASIL

**H**ands down, basil wears the crown as the most popular culinary herb — at least from our Timberlakes Farm point of view. Not only does it reign in our country kitchen, it is the most demanded fresh herb in the marketplace.

In terms of pound sales over the past season, basil exceeded its next fresh herb competitor by 13 times! In terms of income, basil represented over one-half of the bulk sales of all of our products (which included 42 offerings of various herbs and types of produce).

Frankly, without basil, I wouldn't even entertain the notion of entering or competing in the fresh herb marketplace.

Basil's notoriety is earned as the major ingredient in pesto (along with garlic, oil, and a few other optional ingredients such as nuts and grated cheese), and its signature dish is pasta with pesto.

The majority of restaurants we serve utilize basil in their versions of pesto — some use only the top heart portion as a garnish or in salads, while others use it chopped fresh in a variety of dishes.

At home, I experiment with it on literally everything from salads to soups to main dishes. One of our special favorites is to lay a bed of fresh basil beneath chicken pieces ready for baking, top with a light dusting of some form of garlic and lemon ... mmm!

Basil makes a fine cooking companion with sage or dill, plus garlic and lemon.

*Planting Tips:* While basil can be seeded directly into the soil, we've had much better results with started plants that are at least four inches tall when set out. The plants are sturdier, healthier, and show a better long-term yield. (For either method, wait until the soil temperature exceeds 50°F.)

Basil is considered an annual in most parts of the continental United States. It thrives on water and sunlight. The leaves will immediately turn black when touched by frost and the entire plant meets its demise at the first freeze.

*Yield:* At its prime (about one month after setting into the ground) six plants of basil will yield about a pound a week. This yield is based on the gathering of only the hearts (the top four to six leaves on each stalk, when pinched off just above the two new leaves, will subsequently produce another heart). The yield amount through this method of harvest should hold throughout the season. Give the plant a one-week rest between harvests.

*Storage and perishability:* Fresh basil should be stored loosely in an airtight container at refrigerator temperatures and will stay crisp and in good color for about a week.

Basil is a poor candidate for drying and freezing. The fresh product alone will turn black. Basil's life and flavor can be extended when combined in a butter (alone or with garlic), or with homemade cheeses, jellies (particularly apple), or a pesto sauce mix.

When made into pesto it will last several weeks when stored in a covered sterile jar and refrigerated (with a skim of oil on top of the sauce); six months for frozen pesto stored in plastic bags or containers.



**W**hile chives have always been a favorite in my home kitchen, it is second only to basil from our business standpoint.

With the proper attention, preplanning, and maintenance, I believe it could be an even bigger player in the marketplace.

*Why?* Three main reasons: It is the traditional companion to sour cream on the baked potato (served at practically all eateries); it has a long-season yield (first to poke through the ground, last to go down); and it is highly perishable, making it an ideal product for the homesteader who can deliver the herb freshly picked and packaged to local area chefs.

While chives enjoys its fame in the baked potato realm, this herb is extremely versatile.

In my home kitchen, chives are combined with butter for an ideal topping for vegetables, over fresh fish in the baking oven, and mixed with sour cream or cream cheese for a superb dip or topping.

Chowders (particularly potato-based), salads, salad dressings, and omelets are embellished by chives. It is the perfect companion to dill, basil, and fennel by strengthening their true flavors.

Generally, chives are chopped for use. Used in their true length, they quickly become limp strands closely resembling yesterday's cut grass.

*Planting Tips:* Chives can be sowed by seed, or set in the ground as plants. While I've done it both ways, I'd probably vote for direct seeding (then transplanting as you thin out) for the first time around.

Chives can be sown in the fall or in the very early spring, and because it is a perennial it's yours to keep forever more.

Once your first planting is established, it's "easy street" to increase your crop. Chives clumps not only can but need to be divided. Simply dig up the plant, divide the clump into three or four parts, return one to its original home and plant the others in a new row.

We divide ours out in fall and spring and sometimes in-between if the conditions are not terribly dry.

Chives need lots of water and they like the sun, but cloudy conditions will not retard their growth. They much prefer cool temperatures to hot so you can expect a drop in production during the warmest part of your season.

*Yield:* Chives are sold in bunches, similar to parsley, at the grocer. Each bunch is a handful (maybe two inches in diameter) and four bunches generally weigh ½ pound.

On a first crop recently planted, you can expect your bunches to involve 10-12 plants. Once the plants mature, it takes about four to six plants to yield a bunch, and roughly 20 plants to yield ½ pound of the finished product.

*Storage and perishability:* Chives, refrigerated in bunches in an airtight container, have a short (two-day) lifespan — if crispness is paramount. When refrigerated chopped in an airtight container, they may stay crisp a day or so longer, depending upon the moisture content of the product.

Chives are a sorry candidate for drying (unless you have freeze-drying capabilities), but can be chopped and frozen in plastic bags or containers, lasting almost indefinitely.

While frozen chives maintain their flavor, the consistency, when thawed, falls short of desirable. In other words, no baked potato topping here!



**W**hen it comes to parsley, there are basically two players in the culinary world — curly and flat-leaf. The curly variety is the most popular in the marketplace. The flat-leaf variety (often referred to as Italian parsley) is less common. From the standpoint of the home patch, I'd recommend either.

However, if your interest lies in the sale of fresh cut herbs, I'd recommend Italian (flat leaf) parsley.

Why? Simple mathematics.

While the curly leaf variety is the most common — possibly the most favored plate garnish the world over — it also goes for very little to near-nothing a bunch (which usually weighs out at ¼ pound). Unless you're geared up for several acres (pegged against the expenses of seeding, planting, growing, harvesting, and packaging), there's not a whole lot of profit at the end of this rainbow.

Now, Italian flat leaf parsley is another thing all together. Number one — it's a rare bird. Sometimes not available at all (and rarely at best) from the usually large restaurant food purveyors.

Secondly, since it's utilized more for the flavoring than the garnish value, it is a coveted product, particularly in the realm of Italian cuisine.

Since it's hardier than curly (which often wants to die out in the heat of the summer) and is a perennial or biennial in some zones, you may have it for more than one season.

Finally, because it is so rare, it is pricey.

*Yield:* Parslies, like chives, are sold in bunches. Each bunch weighs in at about ¼ pound (four bunches to a pound).

During the peak of the season (about a month into it for a new crop), it requires about six curly parsley plants to make a bunch. Generally speaking, just one plant of flat leaf equals a bunch.

*Storage and Perishability:* Refrigerated in an air-tight container, parsley can keep up to a week, however its crispness goes south in about a day or two. Stored upright (with its feet in water) at a cool room temperature, it can last up to five days before limping out.

Parsley is a fickle candidate for drying in order to maintain its color and flavor, and freezing is not advisable.

Both varieties are great as a herb butter and the Italian variety can be added to Pesto or encapsulated in an herb vinegar for lasting results.





## OREGANO, SAGE, & THYME

If for no reason other than your home kitchen, I wouldn't leave these out — at least a plant or two. Their cooking graces are endless. They are perennials so you have them forever, they store well, a little goes a long way on the flavor scale, and they are much less perishable than other herbs.

Oregano is an Italian-dish favorite, but also lends well to omelets, salads, stews, soups, and meat dishes.

Sage is a poultry favorite, also a great omelet companion, and when combined with basil, garlic and some form of lemon, serves well for meat marinades or meat dish additives.

Thyme — there's nothing like it for any game meat, and many restaurants give it a high rating for chicken and other poultry dishes.

*Yield:* Once these plants are in full swing (about a month after you first plant them or in mid-May for established plants), a good rule of thumb for pound yields goes like this:

- Oregano — a half dozen established plants or 12 first-year plants. Clip or pinch off the top 1/5.
- Thyme — a half dozen plants. Clip or pinch off the top 1/5.
- Sage — a half dozen plants at max, many times less than that. Clip or pinch off only the hearts.

*Storing and perishability:* All three of these fresh-cut herbs can last well over a week when refrigerated in an air-tight container. And all three are great candidates for drying, hung in upside down bunches in a dark warm area with good air circulation. Once completely dried, store in air-tight containers in the pantry at room temperature.

A fun way to store these flavors is to take the ends of your homemade bread that are getting hard as a rock, cube them and sprinkle a combo of these three dried herbs over the top. Place the herbed cubes in a baking pan at the top of the wood stove until completely dry, then store them in an airtight container in your pantry — they're all ready to be used as croutons or in your next poultry stuffing!

Leaves from all three of these herbs are excellent for herb butters. Leafy stems make exquisite visual and flavorful herb vinegars, and their flavors can also be preserved by adding them — especially sage — to your homemade cheeses.



## ROSEMARY

Rosemary takes top billing (along with curly parsley) as a favorite, much-in-demand garnish — possibly because it has long lasting power, a strong aroma, and does not limp out on the plate.

It does not flourish in our climate, so I know very little about its properties. However, the little we do manage to grow is harvested and used fresh (or dried) in our kitchen, primarily with game meat and poultry. As far as I'm concerned, there is no better herb companion to venison than rosemary.

While I cannot address the yield, I can share this morsel:

*Restaurants* — particularly the upscale ones — purchase it by the carloads. It's fairly pricey in the competitive marketplace and to anyone who lives in a zone where rosemary can thrive, I'd suggest taking a stab at the sale of it (in its fresh cut form) to augment the homestead income.



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# Marketing FRESH HERBS

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**Gail Reynolds, Timberlakes Farm**

**T**hose of you looking to earn a living off the land might very well have an untapped reservoir of augmented income in your personal home herb patch! We discovered — quite by accident — a nifty little “niche” market in the local sale of fresh-cut herbs.

However, if you’ve got ringing cash register noises or visions of the “Fortune 500” floating about your head, do not read any further (as the operative words here are “local” and “fresh”).

While these two factors are self-limiting to the scope of your market, they are the essential elements of success in this type of enterprise. These are the key reasons that this niche exists.

Let me explain.

In the fresh cut herb business, there are two main customer sources: upscale restaurants and specialty food markets.

For the upscale restaurant, the offering of fresh herbs (included in their entrees or as garnish) is both a sign of prestige and also indispensable in their competition to maintain an elite customer base.

The same goes for the specialty food markets who cater to customers wanting to purchase a more unique variety of foodstuffs generally not available in the common grocery chain environment.

Absent any alternative, the restaurants obtain their fresh herbs through large food service purveyors — the same folks who deliver their meat, produce, canned goods, paper supplies, and staples.

In the same vein, specialty food markets obtain their fresh herbs (pre-packaged for resale) from larger-than life suppliers of a wide range of grocery store items.

The large purveyors obtain their inventory from literally around the globe, bid at the lowest price in order to realize the highest profit, and shipped to their warehouses via long haul over-the-road trucks.

This stock is purchased in large lots — generally well in advance of any specific customer orders — in order to maintain a steady on-hand inventory.

While these purveyors offer a one-stop-shop convenience to their chefs and market managers, in the case of the highly perishable items, the customer gets the short end of the stick. And the word “fresh” takes on some new meanings (such as “not canned”)!

Such is the case with fresh cut herbs, which can be better than a week old by the time they reach the customer.

Herein lies your niche market, as well as your opportunity to shine.

### **Starting Out**

Not to belabor the point (but to give you chuckle plus some insight), here’s a tidbit of history. In short, our entry into the fresh herb marketplace was sheerly accidental. We had some extra space available in the greenhouse and my companion, Jim, suggested I seed out some herbs. While many would augment our already existing herb patch, we both set our sights on my becoming the “greatest herb plant salesperson ever!”

I failed. Miserably.

And when the seedlings outgrew their greenhouse life, I ended up with 2,500 herb plants in our carport. I was faced with either wholesaling them or (at Jim's suggestion) trashing them.

Exhausting all possibilities for wholesale in about a 200-mile radius, I met with failure again. So I began frantically checking with natural health food stores to see if they'd let me park my body in front of their doors to peddle my herbs.

One of these fine people (who also turned me down) suggested I call some upscale restaurants in our area and referred me to a few likely contacts.

The rest is history.

- Check your telephone book and Sunday paper for the area's most upscale restaurants. (Look also under the Hotel, Country Club, and Lodge headings). Shy away from "chain" restaurants (they generally order on the corporate level for all facilities) and from any dining place that offers an "all you can eat buffet" for less than about \$13 (or whatever might be considered a more "family" eatery than an "elite.")
- Call the places and ask for the name of the head chef and when would be the ideal time to telephone him.
- Call the chefs and set up an appointment time to personally meet with them. (Set these up about a week in advance — all on the same day, if possible — because you have some foot-work to do before you make the trip).
- Make up some type of brochure (with a logo you may have just invented) listing the types of culinary herbs you will have available, your telephone number and your name, then make copies that you can leave with your future customers.
- The evening prior (or day of) your appointments, pick a small sample (a few sprigs) of each of your offerings (enough to leave one of each with every customer).
- Wash them, then set them out loosely (and separated) to semi-dry. Place them in a zipper lock sandwich-sized plastic bag and keep them cooled at about 60° F.
- When you meet with the chefs, introduce yourself, offer your brochure and samples, and be honest about your plight: that you're just starting out, etc.
- Don't be surprised if the chefs smell, tear at, and chew your sample. This is the norm.
- Offer these: harvesting upon order (not before); delivery within 24 hours — maximum — of harvest; personal calls made by you for orders at 1-2 days before delivery (at their convenience); the opportunity to at least try to serve their needs; and a money back guarantee for products not meeting their level of satisfaction.
- Ask of the chefs, in return, these things: the names of the culinary herbs they most often use (and at what amounts per week); a current herb price list, so that you can gauge your pricing accordingly; their ideal time for your advance order-taking telephone call; their desired day for delivery (suggest Thursday if you plan a once-a-week trip; or suggest Monday and Thursday for a twice a week run as these days give them a delivery after and before the weekend; and gives you time to take orders/harvest/and package in between); and honest criticism from them about your product and its packaging, so that you can improve you quality and service as time goes on.
- Discuss terms of payment. Some larger restaurants pay only once a month, many smaller ones pay C.O.D. (collection on delivery).
- If you can financially handle it, don't push C.O.D.s because many upscale operations have a book-keeping (or corporate setup) service for their accounts payable and the personnel couldn't pay you on the spot even if they wanted to.
- Arrive clean, well-groomed, cordial, and honest. Don't "dress up" to the occasion, they know you're a grower. They want to have confidence that you truly have "just harvested" their herbs and they like the apparent connection between the grower and the product.
- Visit with them as long as they care to and leave them with a time and day on which you'll call for an order (should they have one) and let them know how excited you are!

#### Setting Your Price

You will find that most chefs (or market managers) are more than willing to quote you the prices they are currently paying for the essentially week old, less than fresh herbs.

- Inform them during your initial interview, that you'll set your prices in the median range of all the quotes that you obtain.
- Once you've received the quotes from each of your potential customers you can do one of two things: You can take each separate herb and figure the median price range, or you can set a same-price per pound for all of your herbs (as we have eventually done).
- The first method yields a slightly better profit (if you don't take into account the absolute miserableness of the invoicing and bookkeeping aspects since prices vary throughout the season).

The second method, at least for us, works out the best. Since purveyor prices for herbs in our area range from \$9 to \$22, we set all herbs (except for basil) at the same price per pound.

This offers our customers a major discount on some of the really pricey herbs (like dill and lemon verbena) and offers us only a minimal profit on those more common (and less perishable) herbs which plummet in price during the peak growing season. Plus the bookkeeping and invoicing of it all is easier on both you and your customer!

- Basil should always be priced a dollar or two LESS per pound than the rest. It will be your major poundage player and the sheer bulk consumption will justify the pricing.

Even though your basil will be ultimately more fresh, perkier, and of better quality (especially if you go the marketplace and you have to be willing to be there in order for it all to work. And after a while, you'll find that some of your customers will even offer you "more" per pound to help you stay in business and keep your quality product coming their way.

- If you have a computer, an "official" invoice with a listing of products and cost per pound pricings will increase your orders. (Hard to believe, I know.)

We started with the generic type of invoices from discount stores and noticed that when we graduated to a "legitimately" printed invoice, our orders increased three-fold. Part of this, I'm sure, is that we had an established market and our customers became, over time, familiar friends.

But when we presented this politically correct invoice, we got lots of applause from our customers for the "success" level they felt we had reached and we all became so proud to do business together!

On the not-predicted side, our 8 x 11 invoice sheets didn't get lost in the Accounts Payable folders (as did the small 3 x 4-inch generic tears-offs), yielding us earlier and more prompt payments! Whatever invoice you use, state the payment terms agreed upon between you and your customer. And don't stress if the payment doesn't arrive in time (some of our total seasonal payments arrive around the Thanksgiving holiday — providing the generous Christmas bonus we desperately needed!)

Harvesting, cleaning, and packaging:

- Harvest your herbs by the hand-picking pinching-off method as often as is feasible (this leaves your plant less abused and more productive).
- Dip your harvested herbs into "cool" but not cold water for a good wash. Adding a few drops of vinegar to the water will not hurt your herbs, but will make the bugs scatter!
- Lay out the washed herbs under circulated air/fan conditions loosely separated to semi-dry.
- Package your herbs in a loose airy fashion (so that the weight of the top leaves does not put pressure on those underneath) in affordable containers. Your choices consist of:

1. Plastic containers, the one piece clam-type container where the top clicks over bottom. The advantage here is that these are stackable. They can be delivered, carted, and stored without any pressure on bottom packages.

2. Heavy plastic zipper-lock bags. Box these side-by-side and never stack them.

The price of plastic clam-close boxed containers ordered in case lots (per each) are actually less expensive (in bulk) than the plastic bags purchased at your discount or dollar store outlets. Once you have enough cash under your belt, consider this strongly.

For a source of these plastic containers go to your nearest subsandwich fast food restaurant or deli and ask where they obtain these containers locally.

You can sometimes talk these people into selling you some of their plastic containers (at less than the 250 case numbers) for their purchase price and it's worth a try.



- These herbs should be cut, rubber-banded by bunch, and placed into a bucket filled with about one inch of a very weak vinegar to water solution: Italian Flat Leaf parsley, dill stalks, leaf fennel, cilantro, and mint. (Buckets run about 50-cents apiece; arrange for pickup of the last ones when you deliver the new ones.)

While this may seem like pricey packaging, the demand for this type of herb delivery (which maintains optimum freshness) will be far offset the initial expenses.

- Always make sure your weights are exact, as this can be a point of contention with your customers (and can place you in a bad light in their “elite” circuit which is tighter than you might imagine). We purposely package on an ounce or so “over-weight” basis to avoid any concern or potential problem in this regard.

- Store packaged herbs at about 60-70 degrees F until delivery. Beautifully packaged herbs can (and will) meet their demise in regular refrigerator conditions. It’s simply too cold and many of your herbs (particularly those which touch the sides of your refrigerator) will turn brown or black. Furthermore, the shock endured by refrigerated herbs in their sudden transition to the temperatures of your delivery vehicle can wilt and literally ruin them by the time they reach their destination.

- Always package a few extra of everything, for last-minute, on the spot orders.

- Vehicle-space permitting, arrange your herbs in Sterlite containers (or cardboard boxes) according to customer orders. Place your invoices either in a folder or atop the container but never fill in the total as you may have some additional “wants” upon delivery.

This type of organization will allow you the extra time to get to know and visit with your customer. (Ours, by now, set me down for a cola or snack and ask about my family and grandchildren, whom I sometimes cart along. And I, in the process, get a grasp on how their life is getting along.)

### Keeping the Books (Ugh!)

Don’t do what I did! Right now, at the start, set up your bookkeeping in this manner — not only to be able to collect what you’re owed, and so that at the end of the season, you know what you’ve accomplished, but so that you can make some expansion plans based on that info.

Keep an order book — by date. Enter in the called-for herb orders and amounts as they are received. Assign each customer a consecutive invoice number at the time your orders are made.

Maintain a record of total sales for the day (either in the same orders-by-date book or on another document).

Construct a columned ledger (computer or purchased tablet) showing all the herbs you are selling (list them from left to right on the very first row at the top, separated by ruler or printed markings going down the page).

Secondly, starting on the row just beneath your herb listings on the very left first column spaces (top to bottom): enter the date and then across that row (left to right) enter the number of pounds sold in the vertical column for each herb.

Keep one record for each customer. Duplicate NCR writing-pressurized invoices are best. Give the top one to your customer and keep the duplicate for yourself.

File these in a notebook by customer name and whenever they pay. Somehow indicate the payment and date on your duplicate. (I now use a yellow highlighter marker over the invoice number to signify “paid” and then, know that the sum of whatever’s not highlighted is what I need to collect ... yet!)

Still keep a notebook (with a page for each customer, noting the date of delivery and charge and then do the same as above when they pay).

Allow time for this bookkeeping: It's the silent time killer that most agricultural entrepreneurs don't ever plan/allow for, or even think about!

*Example:* For the first two years of our operation, I — who took on aggressive three-day per week deliveries — had absolutely no clue who owed us what at any given time; nor how much of any given product we had sold!

#### The Five Commandments

1. *Always* deliver fresh herbs because this is your calling card and your most critical edge in the marketplace.
2. *Check* your supply *before* you take order; and if you discover — for whatever reason or circumstance — you cannot fill a specific (or standing) order, call the customer post-haste allowing them time to order from a larger purveyor (or substitute another herb on their menu).
3. Your customer base (at least at the beginning) should equal the amount of deliveries (allowing for travel time between stops and at least 10-15 minutes “visit” time at each point of destination) you can make in one-day round trip to and from your home.
4. Avoid taking on any new customers (even though the incentive exists) until you feel confident that you can reliably fulfill their needs and you will not be slighting your loyal established customers while attempting to do so.
5. The personal touch (in a “niche” market such as this) is of more value than you might suspect.

While you have a quality product to market, it will be much in demand by the consumer who understands who you are and where you come from. The friendships you make along this path of honest commerce are priceless.

## DRYING HERBS

COUNTRYSIDE: I use my microwave for drying herbs. I have basil, sage, oregano, marjoram, thyme, dill weed, lemon balm, peppermint, spearmint, cilantro, stinging nettle, mullein, yarrow, parsley, celery leaves, and savory.

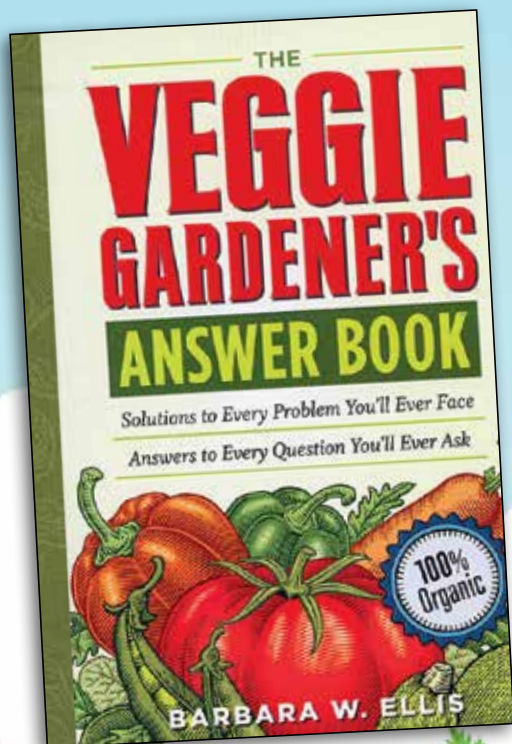
I put a layer of herbs on a white paper towel placed on a white paper plate, then cover with another paper towel and an inverted paper plate. This is microwaved on “high” for sixty seconds. I check for dryness, then recover and turn the whole thing over for another sixty seconds. I repeat this process until the herbs are dry.

They keep their color this way — when I was air-drying, they would turn brown, especially the basil and parsley. — *Reader from Wisconsin*



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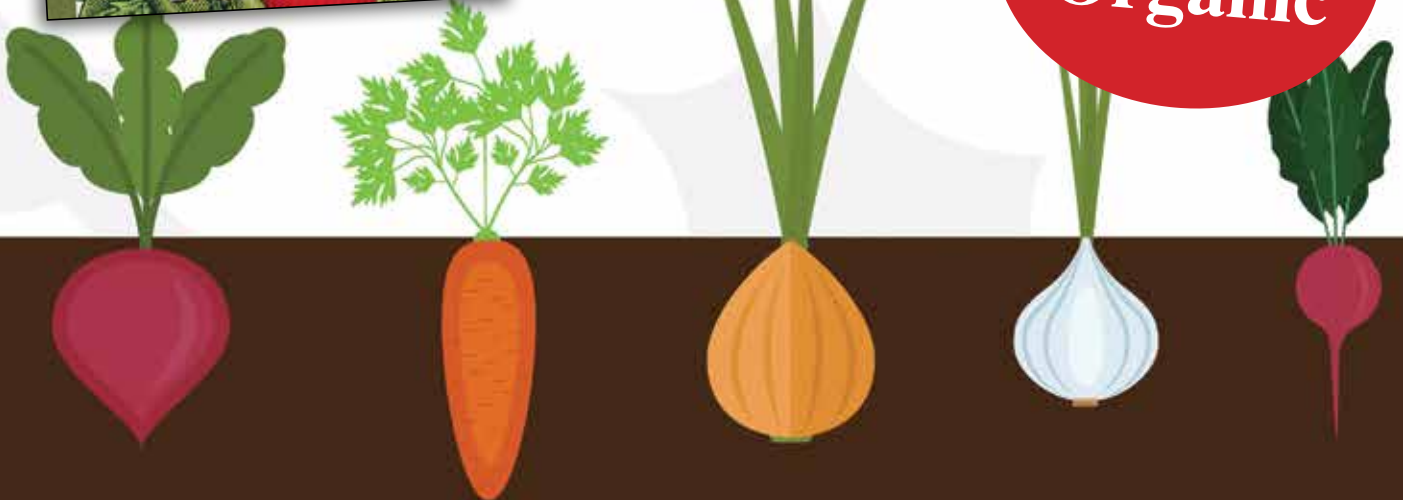
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# The Herbs of Autumn ... and Preparing for Winter

**Gail Reynolds, Timberlakes Farm**

**F**or most of us who toil with the soil — whether commercially or for our personal gardening pleasures — the coming of autumn receives a most hardy welcome. The cooler temperatures riding the waves of the September breeze not only signify fall's impending arrival, but offer (finally!) the promise of reprieve from the scorching days and sultry nights of summer's hotbox. With the lowering temps, there's a renewed interest in tackling the fields and patches outdoors for us (without "baking" in the process). With the changing angle of sunlight and gradually cooler nighttimes, our produce and herbs come into their most perfect ripeness. And the progressive shortening of daylight not only reminds us that the cold months are close to follow, but brings about for most of us an almost-ingrained sense for order.

Our emphasis shifts from growing to harvest, and the focus gradually shifts from outdoor chores and recreations to the indoor comforts of home. The months of September and October here at Timberlakes are in many ways our busiest and most pleasurable.

While our marketplace is at its peak seasonal boom with a high demand for both herbs and produce, we are also occupied with these activities: rejuvenating our herb beds from the summertime bolt and droop; harvesting herbs and putting them up in various ways for both our winter pantry supply and holiday gifts; and utilizing in the kitchen some of what I term "the herbs of autumn" now that we can finally attempt some oven cookery without fear of heat stroke!

I'll share some cooking ideas for these "herbs of autumn" as well as some of our tried and true methods for tackling each of these annual tasks in hopes that you'll be able to adapt a few to your personal lifestyle and for your own use.

## Rejuvenating Our Herb Beds

In our climate, the month of August is a scorcher, with daytime highs wandering into the 100-plus degree heat indices and nights refusing to go below 70°F.

In this rash of heat we spend the better part of our time keeping our herbs and produce in sufficient water to continue to produce not only for our marketplace demands, but just to keep the stuff alive. In addition, we are constantly harvesting the vegetables to prevent sun and heat scorching; and then, of course, we round out the day picking, cleaning, packaging, and delivering or shipping our herb and produce orders.

True confession: That many hours per day in the heat about depletes my energy levels and as much as I love what we do, I begin to develop an apathy about almost everything except for my survival through it. Hence, very minimal weeding; some of the stuff begins to bolt, and dinners tend to consist of bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches plus soup.



Once September arrives, however, I'm back on track and repair and rejuvenate the herb beds, in this order:

### Clip, Snip, and Save

During the cool morning hours in these first weeks of September — taking each row or bed methodically — we clip off all of the flowering bolt of each herb type. In fact, in many varieties we clip three or four inches off the top of the plant itself (flowering bolt and leaves inclusive). In some cases, after we clip, we mow to the ground.

Since it is the natural scope of all living things to form seed and reproduce in the herb venue (not always, but most often), the fresh leafy matter is the desired endpoint.

In the bolting process, much of the energy formerly devoted to the leafy matter is transferred to the flowering seed head, leaving the leaves or leaflets small as well as less perky and robust. The goal is to remove the potential flowering seed heads so that the energy flows back into the leafy portions of the plants. In our situation, where we are harvesting the herb plants for our marketplace daily, the problem is not as drastic as it could be.

However, in the case of certain herbs (sage, tarragon, thyme, and oregano) which are more intense in flavor or more adaptable to cool weather recipes, this can get out of control if not rejuvenated in the first couple of weeks in September.

While we harvest fresh herbs all during the season, we begin the annual autumn rejuvenation of our herbs for drying and other types of processing for our wintertime store and also for holiday crafts and gifts. Once the rejuvenation tasks are completed, the routine harvest continues until the cold weather hits.

As we tackle each type of herb, we carry along a bucket or basket where we place the clippings. These are transferred initially (and very frequently) to large airtight plastic bags or containers and then placed in a dark air-conditioned or moderate refrigerated setting for the time being.

During the heat of the afternoon when we have stopped our pruning, we return to these harvested clippings, dividing them or snipping them for their appropriate eventual uses.

- Flowering stems with few leaves become herbal wreaths. Remove any bottom leaves from stem. Band several stalks together and hang upside down in a dark warm place which receives a good flow of air circulation.
- Flowering stems with many good leaves intact (pretty blooms) become herbal vinegars and jellies. Place those with pretty blooms or flower heads back into an airtight container under moderate refrigeration or air conditioning for a few days until you're ready to carve out a few hours to put up some herbal vinegars or jellies.
- Flowering stems with many good leaves intact (not so pretty blooms) become dried wintertime pantry and gift herbs. Snip off the not-so-pretty blooms and place the leafy portions, at this point, layer-style in a covered cardboard box (regular stackable shirt boxes saved over from Christmas work well), labeled with the type of herb. These will last in this form for a few days until you are ready to devote about one hour to preparing them for a true drying.
- Fresh leaves and leafy cuttings become — dinner. Now that the weather's cooler, you're beginning to use the indoor oven again and looking toward more hardy robust meals, take a handful of these fresh savory herbs for your own personal use. If you have a crockpot stew, a stove-top soup, or an oven casserole in the makings, chop up some of the delectable morsels to fold into your mix for unbeatable flavor.

## Watering and Weeding

Once we've completed the snip process and sorted out our cuttings for the day, we flush irrigate the rows or beds we have completed (in late afternoon/early evening) with water, fertilize, and then pull out the nasty weeds that have crept up during our hot weather frequent irrigations.

Flush watering the recently clipped beds serves a three-fold purpose: 1. The weeds are amazingly easy to pull up in short-order when their roots are swamped; 2. The fertilizer is well-distributed; and 3. The recently cut plants can heal up from any clip-shock they may have experienced earlier in the day with this refreshing drink of water and fertilization energy renewal.

If any of these beds are those which need over-winter mulching at the ground level, this is as good a time as any to place down the mulch, since this will help retain the moisture and should fairly inhibit any major weed growth through before colder weather sets in, when you may want to place straw over the top plant portions to over-winter them.

## Making Good Use of Your Harvest

In preparation for winter and the holidays, many of the cuttings you harvest and sort in your bed rejuvenation project can be put to excellent use through proper storage.

*Drying* for your food pantry, seasoning packets, and teas.

To maintain good color, integrity and flavor, herbs should be dried in darkness, with good air circulation and dryness, and warm, but not hot.

- **Paper bag:** Place your leafy stems in grocery sacks, tie the top of the bag closed with yarn and hang from a nail in a spot with good air circulation. Every once in a while, shake the bag gently to distribute and separate the material.
- **Hanging clusters:** Take a handful of a particular herb and band or tie the stem bottoms together. Then hang, upside down, in a warm (but not hot) dark place with good air circulation. If you choose, you can place an upside down paper sack over the clusters and tie off or band over the stems. This collects any residue that might have fallen off to the ground and also keeps out dust and cobwebs that could present a problem, such as in an outside barn.
- **Screen-dry (this is my favorite):** You'll need a pair of same-size unused window screens. If you don't have any try a garage sale where they can be picked up super cheap. Lay your leafy herb cuttings in a single layer or slightly overlapping across one screen, then place the other screen over it.

Take some fishing line and loop through the bottom and top screens at each corner to secure them together, with the herbs sandwiched in between. Once you've tied each corner off, leave enough line for hanging from hooks (or nails) in a dark, warm, place with good air circulation.

The drying process in proper conditions takes only a few days for most herbs. You want them crispy enough to crunch in your fingertips with no moisture or elasticity, but still maintaining their color, aroma, and taste.

Insufficient drying will cause your herbs to mold. Over-drying will result in loss of flavor, aroma, and color.

Once you have achieved this result, you can either store the entire stemmy cuttings now for later refinement or leaf removal in your kitchen as you cook, or in crumbled form. In either case, storage should be in an air-tight container (I always use lidded glass canning jars as even some forms of plastic seem to allow a seepage of moisture exchange) and to maintain good color in darkness.

*Hint:* For a good crumbed dried herb product, try this method! Obtain an inexpensive plastic colander (with lots of square openings throughout). Generally these fit perfectly atop the usually steaming or Dutch oven size pot. Set the colander into one of these vessels. Place a clump of the dried herb product inside the colander; and then swish with your hand the dried herbs against the colander holes, round and round with only moderate pressure. The tiny uniform herb pieces fall into your pot and the stems stay on top. When you're down to fairly stems, dump them out, clean out the residue, and start a new bunch.

### Herb Vinegars and Jellies

Use the pretty blossomed herb cuttings you saved for vinegars and jellies.

For herb vinegars, place cuttings close to the length of your sterilized bottle in the vessel "upside down" and then fill the bottle with a good grade vinegar. Use apple cider vinegar for a darker effect, clear vinegar for a crisp fresh green appearance. I particularly like the clear, especially for dill, fennel, basil, and mint. It's worth experimenting though to find your favorite combinations.

For herb jellies, separate the fresh leaves (and blossoms if you wish) from the stems. These can be used for infusion of flavor into a preferred jelly recipe or can be placed in the jars for decorative purposes.

In either case, prepare your jelly according to the manufacturer's directions on your box of powdered pectin.

Infusion: Cook 1 cup of your preferred herb leaves with the recipe, then strain out before pouring jelly mixture into jars.

*Decorative:* Make the jelly according to directions. After skimming off the foam, let the liquid mixture cool somewhat (not so hot it will burn the herb leaves) and pour into jars already containing a few nice leaves of the herb of your choice. Seal immediately and then once the jelly begins to partially solidify but is still semi-liquid and movable, turn jars upside down so that leaves float within and to the bottom of the jar instead of being clustered at the top.

Try these herbs with respective fruit juices in your jellies: Basils, mint, and sage with apple juice; Thyme and lemon balm with grape juice; Rosemary and mint with orange juice, then experiment on your own.

### Pestos, Breads, and Cheeses

If you make your own cheese, add in a generous helping of chopped fresh herbs (during the final phase) and you won't be sorry! We have made a semi-soft mozzarella-type goat cheese and our favorites for that (added in during the salting and kneading process) are sage, dill, and chives, but I'd say other herbs are well worth the experimentation.

A great way of savoring the flavor of fresh herbs is within the slices of freshly baked bread. I just use my normal bread recipe and then add about a ¼ cup of chopped herbs plus minced garlic (and sometimes a sprinkling of grated Parmesan) into the knead and it all turns out fine with no other recipe quantity alterations. Dill is great and oregano is pretty wonderful, too. Bread can be sealed in plastic and frozen for later consumption.

Take any standard pesto recipe and prepare as much as you like now, covering it with an oil topping, storing into airtight containers, and then refrigerating (or freezing for later winter use). Generally, the preferred herb is basil, but it's worthwhile to experiment with other herbs, such as sage, tarragon, marjoram, mint, and cilantro.

## Cooking with Herbs

Now that your herb garden is in order, have fun with some fall food fare using your fresh herbs.

**SAGE:** The perfect pumpkin companion and traditional ingredient for poultry stuffings. Enhances wild game dishes. Use as a bed or top seasoning for roasted or baked pork or poultry.

Try this sage and pumpkin sauce over your preferred pasta! Combine 1/8 cup of chopped fresh sage with 1 cup of cream and 1/2 cup of pureed pumpkin. Simmer over medium heat for about 3 minutes.

Add 1/4 cup of grated Parmesan, salt, and pepper to taste, cooking about 7 more minutes until slightly thick. Remove from heat, stir in 1 tablespoon of butter and toss with cooked pasta. Serve immediately.

**THYME:** Use in marinade, rubbing, or cooking sauce with any wild game. Try this as your key ingredient in stuffed squash and in squash-based soups. Try thyme in your oyster stew for a pleasant taste delight!

The next time you prepare a pot roast, sprinkle thyme over your meat and accompanying vegetables.

**TARRAGON:** Replace the basil with tarragon in your favorite pesto recipe for a more cool weather flavor intensity. Use the pesto in the traditional manner over cooked pasta, or try spreading some just underneath the skin when baking or roasting chicken and other poultry. Tarragon, in fresh or pesto form, is a favorite companion for autumn fish and shellfish harvests.

**OREGANO:** Think spaghetti, ragouts, and stews. Combine with basil in the cooking or stewing process. Combine with a bit of sage and basil in your favorite simmering concoctions and you'll be pleasantly surprised.

Oregano is happy anytime it is combined with cheese, and we use it often in cheese-meat-noodle casseroles and omelet concoctions. It is also our preferred herb choice in meatloaf.

For a full plate of some tried and true fall and cool weather herb recipes contributed by the chefs we service, check out our website around the first of September: [www.timberlakesfarmherbs.com](http://www.timberlakesfarmherbs.com) or e-mail us anytime.



## Plant a Spaghetti Herb Garden

You might consider this a very small garden, but it contains the herbs you can use for your fresh tomato sauces, spaghetti sauces, pasta dishes, etc. Use at least a twelve inch pot. Place about 10 small rocks in the bottom for drainage. Fill with good quality soil, leaving about two inches of top space.

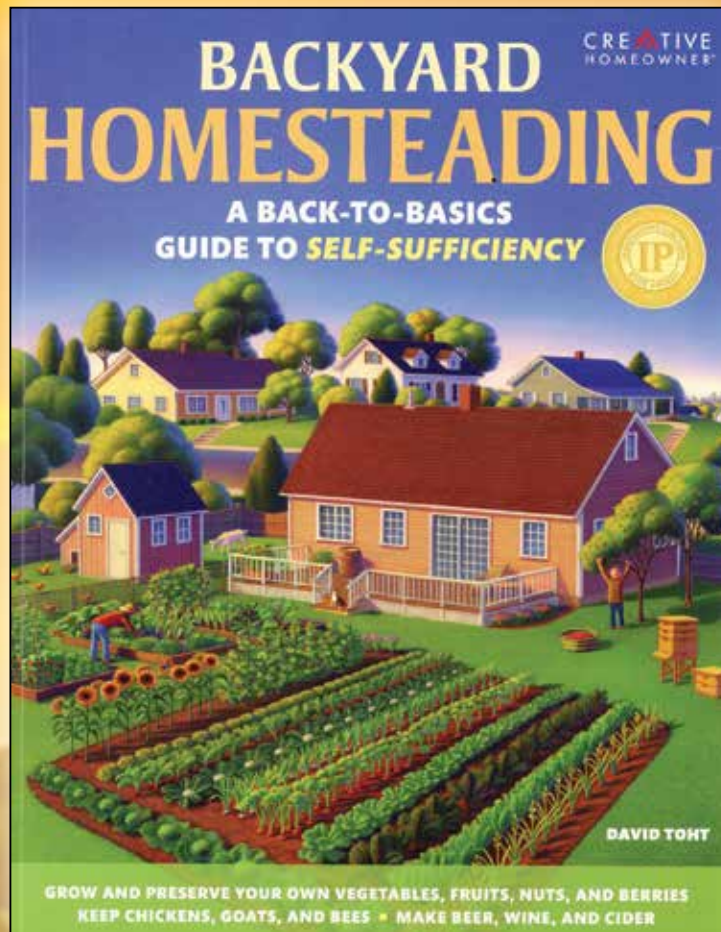
Plant one basil plant in the middle of the pot. Around it plant one thyme, one sweet marjoram, one parsley, and one Greek oregano. Set the pot in a sunny location, preferably close at hand – a deck, patio, or right out the kitchen door.

Snip off the flavorful leaves as you need them. The more you snip, the bushier the plants will get. Especially keep the basil trimmed or it will get very leggy.

Make several of these pots this spring and give some as gifts that will be enjoyed all summer. —A reader from Wisconsin

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# Grow Herbs in Winter

## And some great gift-giving ideas



**Gail Reynolds, Timberlakes Farm**

**W**intertime, in all its powerful beauty and nearly-silent change-of-pace splendor, can carry with it a good dose of chagrin and withdrawal. Particularly for those of us who have become accustomed to utilizing culinary herbs (gathered from our home patch) in our daily home meals. Let's face it! It's another paradox of nature.

Just about when we're ready to focus our energies indoors to hearth home and family, and have the time, cooler temperatures and incentive to prepare some of those elaborate, healthy and hardy meals...the bounty of fresh herbs (readily available throughout the busy spring, long hot summer, and hectic autumn harvest time when our attentions were devoted to the outdoors of our homestead) have diminished.

Not to fret. There's more ways to skin this cat than cords of wood in your winter stash.

The options for a year-round supply of herbs are numerous: with some as close as your windowsill; a few, depending upon your climate zone, just beneath the layer of protective mulch you laid over your perennials a month or so ago; and a host of others bordering on the fringes of culinary creativity.

### **Fresh Herbs**

The perceived ideal, of course, for herbs in winter, would be to have an ongoing supply of the fresh product.

Within this realm, there are only three possibilities: harvest from the outdoors; harvest from an indoor herb garden; and harvest from the grocery store.

Of these of course, harvest from an already established outdoor patch is preferable — since in many weather zones, a limited supply (at least) can be available; and most particularly since your planting and maintenance work is behind you.

The least desirable, from my point of view (even though we grow and market pre-packaged fresh-cut herbs through the grocery store venue), is the purchase option.

## Wintertime Outdoor Harvest

Unless you're fortunate enough to live in a mild climate zone with no fear of frost (or such few frost days that you can temporarily protect your herb patch), you should know these things:

1. At the first frost, you may kiss your outdoor basil and mint "goodbye" — the basil, forevermore (since it's an annual) and mint, until next spring.
2. Also at the first frost, unless covered with a very generous topping of straw (or other type of cover), tarragon will most likely leave you for the season as well.
3. While the exposed foliage of sage, oregano, and thyme may become somewhat discolored and bruised by the first frosts — they will continue to produce usable leaves (even if left uncovered) until heavy duty prolonged cold temperatures set in.
4. Chives will die back for a good winter's rest at the first heavy frost or freeze.
5. Salad burnet and winter savory thrive during the winter (covered or not).

Covering your herbs with a heavy layer of straw can buy you months of continued harvest and, provided you are not snowed in as you read this, you can still do that now.

If you live in a fairly moderate climate zone, such as we do in Southwest Missouri (where relatively mild temperatures are not uncommon in some years), you might be surprised at the amount of herbs still viable and harvestable throughout the winter months in your outdoor home patch — using this coverage method (which is a nice composting thing to do for your herbs at any rate).

Simply lift up the straw cover, gather yourself a handful of the herb of your choice, and reposition the covering. Done deal.

Snow cover, in my experience, does not seem to be the governing factor here (in fact, over the straw, it provides an enhanced protective environment).

But prolonged periods of below-freezing temperatures will send most herbs directly into hibernation.

Of course there are limits here, and if there's a tremendous amount of snow covering, you may not be able to remember which herb is where. It also may not be worth the digging.

## Indoor Herb Gardens

Of the indoor fresh herb options, there are two, in my opinion, that make sense. An indoor potted garden inside your home; or a potted or planter garden inside a greenhouse or glassed in sunroom area, if you have one.

If you do happen to have a greenhouse/sunroom type area that can be closed off — and where the prevailing temperatures can stay above freezing — this is an ideal way of maintaining a fresh supply of herbs during winter.

The advantages of these alternatives are that the daytime sun should provide the necessary heating (an open door on warmer days should provide the necessary air circulation), and you can expand the amount of herb plants harbored here, since you're not taking up usable home space.

Whether your indoor herb garden is in the home, or greenhouse-type setting, you have two alternative planting methods: seeds or cuttings.

The location of your indoor garden is dependent upon choice, availability, and space.

- *Containers:* If you are going to use cuttings from your existing outdoor patch, use fairly large containers, so that the plants will not become root bound. If you intend to seed your plants, a smaller container will suffice.

- *Drainage:* No matter the size of the container or the choice of planting method, make sure that your pot, planter, or container has sufficient drainage (as nothing will kill most herbs quicker than having their feet stand in water for prolonged periods of time). Place some gravel, broken glass, pot pieces, or whatever in the bottom before you put in your soil.

- *Soil*: Use potting soil, rather than your ground soil, as it is not as heavy or dense, and is better aerated.
- *Plant cuttings vs. seeds*: Plant cuttings (for some herbs) will generally take longer to produce usable herbs for you, than direct seeding into the pot.  
However, your yield from the newly seeded plants will be less over the long haul, than potted perennial cuttings once they take hold.  
In some cases, if you want these herbs fresh, you may have to seed them: basil, dill, cilantro, and parsley.
- *Plant cuttings*: Taking plant cuttings can be done at any time (even this late in the season) so don't be shy.  
Go to your herb patch and simply dig up a generous portion of your oregano, sage, thyme, tarragon, winter savory and salad burnet. While you're there, dig up a clump of chives.  
You don't need the entire plant, just slice out a portion (all the way to the root base) that you feel will be adequate. Sometimes with sage, you can simply pull a side portion away from the mother plant.  
Don't be put off if the plant looks and acts dead. As long as the roots seem viable, you'll be in business.  
Divide up your clumps (I usually gently tear them apart for separation). Then, before you plant any given variety, cut the plant growth portion (leaves or where foliage used to be) down to about 1-2 inches from the base. Also cut the root portion to about one to two inches from below the base.  
Wet down the potting soil in your containers and plant the cuttings so that only about an inch of the top is visible. Place containers off the ground to prevent any freezing.  
After this, keep your soil moist (but not drenched) and make sure that the area in which they are housed does not get too hot (if heated by the sun) — it's okay to open the door in the afternoons — nor too cold (freezing prohibited).
- *Sowing seeds*: Prepare your containers as you would for plant cuttings, only sow a sprinkling of seed on top of the wetted potting soil, and then cover the seeds with a slight covering of potting soil. Moisten down and wait.  
To germinate, most herb seeds will need at least a 65 degrees F environment during the better portion of the day and will need sunlight, so place the containers accordingly. Keep the soil moist (not soaking — this will cause rot rather than germination) until the little puppies start to show signs of life.  
Then, water as you would any plant, but only begin harvest after the plant is well underway (about their third true leaf groups) and then only harvest sparingly.

### Purchasing Fresh Cut Herbs

Unless you're really, really in a bind, shy away from this option if you can. In the first place, the price is prohibitive and, generally speaking, because herbs are so perishable, the quality of the herbs is lower (over its grocery store shelf life) than the fresh-cut (from your own patch) to which you have become accustomed.

### Creative Value-Added Herb Products

(Great for holiday give-giving as well as winter home use.) If you still have any herbs growing outdoors (salad burnet and winter savory at the very least should be), gather them now.

If you have harvestable herbs in pots, planters, or underneath your straw (and possibly snow), gather them now.

Once they're gathered, take a few hours out of your day and make some herbal vinegars (or hang them to dry in an airy warm place) for use in some creative dried herb mixes later on.

### Herbal Vinegars

1. Sterilize some bottles and their lids (wine bottles are okay, the glass bottles water-types are exquisite and pint canning jars will suffice). I use a bleach/detergent mix to wash, then soak in boiling water to sterilize.



2. Once the bottles are cooled and thoroughly dry (this is a must, as water in the vinegar mixture will cloud it up), place a few herb sprigs upside down into the glass container.
3. Pour in room temperature vinegar (white is preferred, but cider will do) to within about ¼ inch of the top of the container.
4. Seal the container with a cork, its own screw on top, or jar lid.
5. Melt some paraffin wax, then let it cool down (not to the “white” stage, but less than “burn you” stage) and carefully submerge the lid into the paraffin below the closure point so that the wax covers the lid as well as the top part of the container.
6. Repeat this about three or four times (reheating the paraffin up to the desired temperature, if necessary).
7. These will be ready for use in about three weeks. Use in stews, soups, salads, and as a meat or fish marinade to obtain the desired flavor of any given herb.
8. As gifts: You can be creative and tie something about the neck of the bottle or jar, just at the bottom of the lid. You can do this after you complete the paraffin process or you can do it before (making sure it doesn’t drop into the wax as you’re sealing the lid on).

### Dried Herb Mixes

If you’ve been savvy enough to have dried some herbs early on — or have just now harvested some to dry — you can save these for use all winter long. And while these are never as tasty as the fresh variety, they can come pretty close.

If you want to be creative, you can drum up some ideal time-saver combinations and shorten your holiday gift-giving list at the same time.

- Tea bags are pretty neat since they enclose the dried herbs and will offer the flavor (but not the little green things floating in your food) and can be pre-made into just the right amounts for one meal, with no measuring later on. Also, packaged in a tin, they make ideal gifts.

### Herb Mixes

Some suggestions:

- Beans: Parsley, Sage, Thyme, Savory
- Beef or Venison: Oregano, Thyme, Tarragon (or Sage)
- Chicken: Basil (or Dill seeds), Sage, Thyme
- Fish: Basil (or Fennel Seeds), Parsley, Chives
- Bouquet Garni (for soups, stews): Parsley, Thyme, Bay
- Bouquet Provençal (for soups, stews, sauces): Thyme, Rosemary, Fennel Seed, and Bay.

At any rate, between the fresh, dried, and value-added combinations, your family should enjoy a very delicious herb-filled wintertime.

## DRYING SAGE

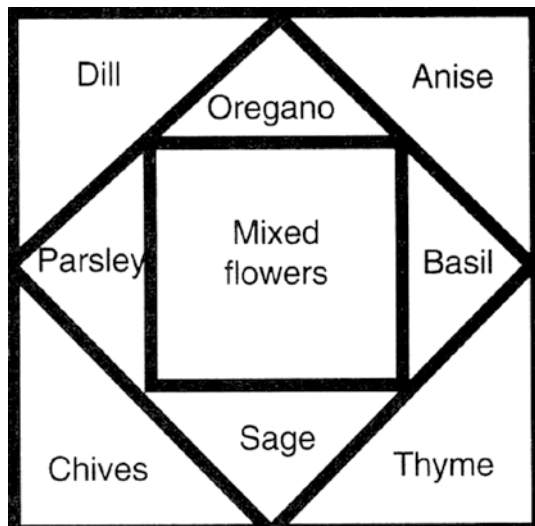
Sage and some other herbs have a different flavor fresh rather than dried, which may change the way recipes turn out.

To dry sage, cut the stalks (preferably before they bloom), tie them in a bunch, and hang the tops down in a dry, airy, shady place. They can be hung under a porch roof, in the attic, or even from the knob of a kitchen cupboard.

When completely dry, crumble off the leaves and store them in a closed container.



## Tiered Planting Box — Simple to Make & Ideal for Herbs



This planting box could be as simple or fancy as a person wants it to be. Its design is simple: squares. The size can be customized to fit your needs. You can choose the number of tiers as well.

Our planter was built out of scrap 2 x 4's from a fence we tore down last year. To build the boxes, I just nailed the boards together end-to-end.

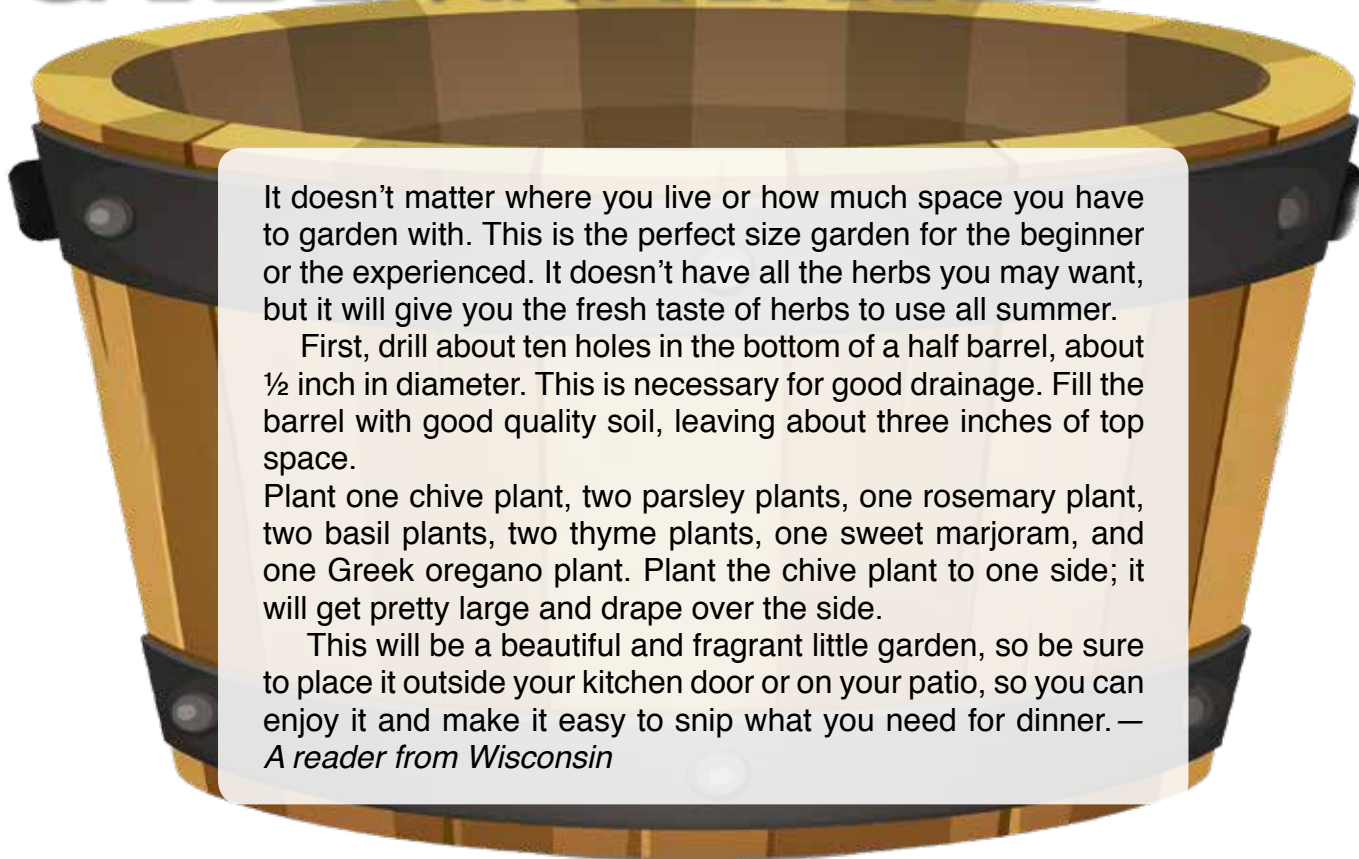
After building the first (largest) box, you need to mark the center point of two connected sides. Then measure the distance between those two marks, straight across. That's the length of the boards for your next tier. You'll have to cut four boards at that length and nail them together in a square also. You do this for each tier that you want. Once you've built all of your tiers, you're ready to assemble it.

To assemble the planter, lay down the largest square where you want the bed to be. Fill that square with your soil/compost mixture. Level it off and tamp it down slightly.

Your second tier will go on with the corners matching up to the center points on the side of your first square. Fill that square with your planting mix and level it off. Your third tier will go in the same direction as the first level.

With this planter I grew eight herbs and a mixture of flowers.—*A reader from California*

## GARDEN IN A BARREL



It doesn't matter where you live or how much space you have to garden with. This is the perfect size garden for the beginner or the experienced. It doesn't have all the herbs you may want, but it will give you the fresh taste of herbs to use all summer.

First, drill about ten holes in the bottom of a half barrel, about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter. This is necessary for good drainage. Fill the barrel with good quality soil, leaving about three inches of top space.

Plant one chive plant, two parsley plants, one rosemary plant, two basil plants, two thyme plants, one sweet marjoram, and one Greek oregano plant. Plant the chive plant to one side; it will get pretty large and drape over the side.

This will be a beautiful and fragrant little garden, so be sure to place it outside your kitchen door or on your patio, so you can enjoy it and make it easy to snip what you need for dinner.—*A reader from Wisconsin*