

Favorite Culinary Herbs For the North Texas Landscape

A few basics for growing herbs in North Texas, or anywhere else, are good garden soil, not overly rich but not poor; most like full sun (5 – 6 hours) per day, preferably morning sun, and adequate water. Most herbs are drought tolerant but may require supplemental watering to get established and during dry times. **By far the most important requirement is good drainage.** Herbs are easy to grow but none like standing in soggy soil. For best results plant herbs in raised beds.

Annual Herbs (A) are short lived plants which mature, bloom and set seed in one season.

Biennial Herbs (B) live for two seasons, they flower and set seeds the second year. These herbs generally are more flavorful the first year and will die after setting seed. Many can be treated as annuals.

Perennial Herbs (P) are plants which live for several years.

Tender Perennials (TP) may freeze to the ground and come back from the roots or may be evergreen all winter. Generally will die during sever winters.

The definition of an herb is any useful plant such as culinary, fragrant, medicinal, cosmetic, dye, decorative, potpourri, aromatherapy, and insect repellent.

Following are a few popular culinary herbs that grow and thrive in North Texas.

Basil (*Ocimum Basilicum*) A: 12" – 36" - A grassy, sweet clove flavor and fragrance; there are 180+ varieties, with more being cultivated each year. Wonderful with tomatoes, both fresh and cooked and a must in pesto, sprinkle on pasta, fish, chicken and salads. Cook only briefly or cut and add at end of cooking. Basil will thrive in the heat of a Texas summer in addition to adding color to the landscape. Sweet Basil is the favored variety but Cinnamon, Thai, Opal, Genovese, Purple Ruffles, African Blue and many others will add texture and color to the garden as well as interest to food. Basil is a heat loving plant so plant after the soil is above 65 degrees and night temperatures do not drop below 50°.

Bay (*Laurus nobilis*) P: Can reach 15 to 20 feet in this part of Texas. A sweet and slightly peppery taste, bay leaves enrich soups, stews, desserts and slow cooking sauces over a period of hours. Add several whole leaves to dishes at the beginning of cooking time and leave in until end, then remove leaves before serving. Bay leaves are an important ingredient of bouquet garni. Bay is a slow grower but will reach large shrub or small tree size if planted in a protected area and shaded from the hot afternoon sun. The Greater Fort Worth Herb Society has one over 15 feet high in their Pioneer Herb Garden off University Blvd.

Calendula (*Calendula officinalis*) A: 12" – 18" - Known also as pot marigold, calendula has a bittersweet edible flower used in salads, dips, vinegars and spreads. The petals are also used as a substitute for saffron in rice and soup dishes. Easy to grow from seed and a pretty flower in the garden, plant in sunny location in late summer for fall blooms, or in early spring. Will reseed but dies back during Texas summers and is not winter hardy in north Texas.

Capsicum (*Capsicum spp.*) A: Generally small shrubs cultivated in the home garden "peppers" range from sweet to mild to fiery hot. A few such as the chile pequin will survive mild winters in north Texas if protected with a heavy mulch.

Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*) A: 8" – 12" - One of the *Fines Herbs*, chervil has a very delicate, slightly grassy flavor with a hint of anise. Its lacey leaves are quick to wilt and die in the Texas summer. Chervil reseeds freely and sprouts in December and January. Sprinkle fresh chopped leaves over carrots, cucumbers, asparagus and mushrooms. Add to fish, poultry and egg dishes. Grow as a cool weather plant in a partly shady corner of the garden.

Chives, onion (*Allium schoenoprasum*) P: 18" clumps - Hollow green leaves that grow up from tiny bulbs, chives have a delicate onion flavor. Add chopped leaves to soups and salads; use in cottage cheese, cream cheese, omelets and baked potatoes. Pretty purple flower adds zing to green salads. Plant seedlings or seeds in early spring in full sun or part shade. Chives make a good border plant and are a companion plant for roses and tomatoes as a deterrent to black spot and mildew.

Chives, garlic (*Allium tuberosum*) P: 12" – 18' - Use is similar to onion chives but has flat leaves and a mild garlic flavor. Plants produce white flowers in late summer which are attractive to bees. Plant stays green and flavorful all winter in Texas so plan to use fresh year round.

Cilantro/Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) A: 2' – 3' - The leaves have a sweet intense flavor and are used to flavor Mexican, Middle East and Asian foods. The seeds and roots are used in curries and pickling spices. Coriander is an easy herb to grow from seed but does not like to be transplanted. As a garden plant Coriander attracts useful insects like bees and other pollinators. It will quickly go to seed when days are long and hot so plant in early spring or fall.

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*) A: 3' – 4' - Most often associated with pickles; the fresh leaves can be used with fish, eggs, cream sauces and dips. Dried seeds have a nutty taste and are used in breads, butters, cheeses and curries. Seeds germinate and grow quickly with little attention. Dill will die out in the heat of summer but look for seedlings when cooler days arrive. Dill is supposed to enhance the growth of cabbage, onions and lettuce in the garden.

Epazote (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*) A & P: Described as a must for field beans it is also excellent with corn and fish. In most places it is considered a weed and grows wild throughout most of America.

Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) TP: 4' or more - Leaves and stems are suited for relishes, salads and garnishes. Fennel helps remove odors when cooked with fish. Ripe seeds add a soft taste of anise to puddings, spiced beets, sauerkraut, breads and candies. Bronze fennel makes a wonderful background plant in your landscape. It can grow 7 to 8 feet high. Florence fennel has a bulb that can be sautéed and added to salads or fish. Plant seedlings or seeds after danger of frost has passed. Fennel is a host plant for swallowtail butterfly caterpillars.

Lavender (*Lavandula spp.*) A & P: 3' Lavenders are shrubby plants preferring well drained, sandy soil. Most commonly used in perfumes, soaps and potpourris; lavender adds an interesting flavor to jellies, jams, sugar and cakes. Use a light hand when adding or flavor will be too perfumy. A few buds are always included in the French *Herbes de Provence seasoning*. English lavender (*L. angustifolia*) will grow in north central Texas up to about Dallas if given care. Plant in the driest area of your garden, in full sun and neglect the plants thereafter. Cut back in early spring. Plant as edging along paths and borders or in rock gardens.

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) P: 2' bush - A member of the mint family, lemon balm is a popular ingredient in herb teas served either iced or hot. The leaves are also used to flavor fruit salads, green salads, cold soups, and vinegar. Lemon Balm is generally not used in cooked dishes. Will grow in partial shade.

Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) TP: 4 – 5' - Lemongrass is an attractive grass from the tropics related to pampas grass. It has become very popular in recent years as a must in Thai and Vietnamese cuisine. It grows best in full sun with good drainage and will withstand temperatures down to 20° with heavy mulching. Harvest by cutting low to the ground or breaking off a stem from the mother plant.

Mexican Mint Marigold (*Tagetes lucita*) TP: 3' - Not a mint or a marigold, this Texas native is our substitute for French tarragon. The flavor is sweet and somewhat like anise. Sow seed after danger of frost has passed. Its yellow flower adds color to the fall landscape and is one of the last herbs to flower in the garden.

Mints (*Mentha spp.*) P: 2' - There are hundreds of varieties of mints, the best known are spearmint and peppermint but try one of the fruit flavors or chocolate. Brew mint into refreshing teas. Sprinkle over salads and vegetables. Blend minced leaves into yogurt, butter or cream cheese; leaves can garnish ice drinks and jellies; a must with lamb. Mints are invasive, wide-spreading plants, which are best kept in containers and prefer shade from the afternoon sun. Must be planted from cuttings or root division. Seeds are not true to mother plant.

Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) A: Upright or Trailing - The leaves, flowers and flower buds give a peppery flavor to cream cheese, egg dishes, salads and vinegars. Blossoms make an unusual container for dips. Nasturtiums planted near roses will help trap aphids. Here in Texas, plant in August or September for a fall crop of brilliant color. Hard frosts will kill it but it should flower well into December. Or plant seeds in February for early summer color.

Oregano (*Origanum spp.*) P: 1' to 2' – Many varieties and appearances from dwarf-leafed creeping to sub bush. Oregano has a sharp aromatic flavor; known as the pizza herb, it is found in most Mexican, Greek and Italian dishes. It adds a warm spice flavor to tomato based sauces. Roots will survive Texas winters if protected with mulch. During mild winters plant will stay green year round. Use fresh or dried.

Lippia graveolens, known as Mexican oregano is a member of the verbena family and is the preferred oregano in Mexican cooking. Both flourish in North Texas.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum* and *p. neapolitanum*) B: 18" to 24" - Considered a breath freshener, parsley contains significant amounts of vitamins A, B and C. Add to salads, egg dishes, cream sauces, gravies, stews and soups. Seeds are slow to germinate so it's best to start from container plants. Will remain green through winter but is best treated as an annual. The curly (*crispum*) makes an attractive border around a vegetable, herb or flower garden. The flat leafed (Italian) parsley has a more pronounced flavor and is preferred by professional chefs.

Pineapple Sage (*Salvia elegans*) TP: 3' - Pineapple sage and other fruit sages are best added to cold drinks and fruit salads or use in herbal jams and jellies. They will grow to 3 or 4-foot bushes with deep pink tubular flowers visited by hummingbirds. They are not freeze tolerant but will sometimes send up new shoots from last year's roots. Pineapple shade prefers afternoon shade and needs frequent water during our hot summers.

Rose (*Rosa spp.*) P: Shrub to climbing – Yes, roses are considered herbs! Rosehips are tart and cranberry like. They are known for their high content of vitamin C and are used to make syrups, jellies, teas, wines, breads and muffins. Rose petals can be used in tea blends, rose water, jelly and sugars, or candy the petals. Every Texas garden should have at least one rose bush in it. They like well-drained soil and full sun. Underplanting with garlic and onions helps repel nematodes.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) TP: Prostrate or creeping to large upright evergreen shrub - Rosemary's pungent pine flavor is especially good with foods high in fat such as lamb and pork. Add to rice and potatoes, also good in breads and stuffing. Rosemary thrives in the Texas heat. Plant in full sun and give it plenty of room as it will become a very large evergreen bush. Rosemary is being used more and more in the home landscape as a hedge. There is also a prostrate or creeping variety that will trail down over a wall or garden edge. Both have pretty blue to pink flowers beginning in late summer through winter.

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) P: 12" to 30" - This culinary salvia has a strong musky flavor that helps balance rich foods. Combine with thyme, marjoram or savory in pork, goose, duck, and fatty fish. A pinch of sage improves the flavor of soups, tomato dishes, cream sauces and gravies. It is a traditional seasoning for Thanksgiving turkey and stuffing. Plant in full sun in well-drained soil. Sage has a gray-green colored leaf but also comes in purple, golden and variegated colors.

Salad Burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*) P: 24" clump, full sun – A small evergreen plant that has a delicious cucumber flavor to salads, dips, butters, and vinegars. Flavor is best during cool seasons. Leaves tend to become bitter in the summer. It is easy to grow from seed.

Sweet Marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) TP: 12" - Marjoram has a sweet spicy fragrance used to enhance soups, sauces and meat dishes. It is usually blended with other herbs such as rosemary and thyme and almost always blended with its cousin oregano (*Origanum spp.*). Because of the many varieties purchase your plants from reliable growers to assure a true culinary marjoram. The large purple flower heads make a good addition to the late summer garden.

Thyme (*Thymus spp.*) P: Creeping to 12" shrubs - Thyme has a strong pungent flavor so use lightly. Add to soups, salads, stuffing, sausage, clam chowder, bouquet garni, pork or lamb; used for making vinegar, marinades and oils. Lemon varieties are used in jelly and desserts. It is one of the *finest herbes* of French cuisine. For a different taste, try flavored varieties such as lemon thyme and oregano thyme. Also try caraway and nutmeg thyme. Most thyme tend to be low growing compact plants. Grow from seeds or seedlings. Plant around a walkway as the oils release a delightful scent when walked on. Thyme reportedly benefits eggplant, potatoes, and tomatoes when planted near them. In addition, gardeners recommend plantings of thyme to repel cabbageworms and whiteflies.

Violet (*Viola odorata*) P: Small mounds not taller than about 12" sweet violets have a fragrant oil used in perfume. The heart-shaped leaves are edible when cooked like pot greens. The colorful petals can be candied and are a popular decoration on cakes and desserts. Float the fresh flowers in punch and cool summer drinks. Sprinkle them over a springtime salad. Violets are a cool weather plant and bloom in early spring. They make a pretty border in a shade or semi shade garden.

Winter Savory (*Satureja montana*) P: 12 to 15" – A winter hardy evergreen shrub, winter savory is often used in knot gardens. It grows in full sun and gives a sharp peppery flavor to vegetables, poultry, beef, breads and dressing.

Reference:

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