

## HERBS

Growing herbs seems to follow very decided patterns of fashion. At the moment, because of the phenomenal interest in food and cooking, they're very much on trend and even non-gardeners want to have a few pots of fresh coriander, dill or basil ready for use.

Most herbs are very easy to grow, but in the past the problem has been how to grow them in a garden setting. Special herb gardens sound very seductive and nostalgic, but the reality is that many herbs have a weedy, often invasive, habit of growth. What begins as an aromatic, attractive area can quickly look at best unloved, and at worst, derelict.

Decorative box-edged beds laid out in geometric patterns can help contain herbs, but the gardeners control needs to be absolutely ruthless, digging out and replanting the more invasive species each year. Herbs like mint, lemon balm and fennel need to be cut back as soon as they begin to look straggly, to encourage fresh, young (and tidy) new growth.

Low-growing herbs like marjoram, thyme, pennyroyal and chamomile can look good planted chequerboard style in paving, where alternate slabs have been left out for planting holes. This also works well with bushy herbs like sage, lavender, cotton lavender, savory, hyssop and rosemary, which can be clipped into shape if they threaten to become too large.

Using herbs to line a pathway, as a low hedge or edging is also a good way of enhancing a gardens design and interest. The hedge acts as a frame, finishing off the pathway or border, and giving it more importance. In the kitchen garden, chives and parsley make a fresh green edging to vegetable beds, which is as useful as it is decorative. Lavender hedging is an out and out cliché for hedging, but the scent and colour make it unbeatable, especially on lighter soils. The magnificent lavender hedge surrounding the sunken garden at Normanby Hall, is around 40 years old, but still thriving thanks to well-drained sandy soil and regular pruning after flowering. Catmint, sage, cotton lavender and the Curry Plant also make good hedges, and on a larger scale, *Rosa rugosa* is fragrant and colourful over a very long season.

Roses might not be regarded as herbs by many gardeners, but like a lot of plants we now use purely for ornament these days, like pinks, violets and primroses, they have a host of culinary, medicinal and other uses. Where they are beautiful enough, herbs can hold their own in the flower border, and many are essential garden plants. The dark feathery foliage of bronze

fennel is very handsome and associates well with almost every other plant. Unless you're growing it for the seed, or using it to attract hoverflies into the garden to keep aphids under control, cut it back as soon as it begins to run up into flower, so that there is always a dense mound of fragrant foliage.

Solomon's Seal is an early summer beauty, with its elegant arching stems and white hanging flowers. It does best in semi-shade. Although the whole plant is poisonous, and should only be used under medical supervision, it has important cosmetic and medicinal uses, including the ability to lower blood sugar. Gerard, in his *Herball*, describes the root as being '*good for bruises black or blew, got by women's wilfulness in stumbling upon their hasty husband's fists*' - it's still used to relieve bruising.

Monarda, also known as bergamot, or Bee Balm, is a lovely border plant, and does well on the heavy soils we have in many parts of the county. On light soils it tends to suffer badly from powdery mildew. It's used to flavour Earl Grey tea, can be used in cooking and has medicinal uses too. The variety 'Cambridge Scarlet' is easily the most showy, forming large clumps topped with stunning red flowers in summer.

*Salvia sclarea* is these days a seldom-grown biennial, with striking large violet or white bracts on an imposing plant. It's used both medicinally and in the perfumery industry – which should tell us something about ourselves as, when handled, the whole plant smells strongly of sweat.

Purple Sage has to be one of the most versatile of garden plants; it looks great in borders or as a hedge, and if I had a formal rose garden, I would underplant it with purple sage. The contrast between the sumptuous rose blooms, whatever their colour, and the smoky sage leaves would be stunning. Sage is one of our most important culinary and medicinal herbs, including, it's said, the ability to prolong life!

Culinary herbs are, I think, best grown in pots. They look attractive, can be placed close to the kitchen door for cutting, and those with rambling tendencies can be kept under control. Mint is an essential herb, and I defy anyone not to feel better for inhaling the scent of its crushed leaves. It's an enthusiastic and untidy grower, but in a terracotta pot it becomes a reformed character. Indeed, it needs to be split up into smaller pieces and replanted each spring, otherwise it seems to dwindle away. Look out for the wrinkled cream-splashed leaves of Pineapple Mint, the yellow and green striped Ginger Mint, and Apple Mint with its rounded furry leaves.

The gold variegated form of Lemon Balm is strikingly beautiful in spring, but the leaves quickly lose their initial freshness and become mottled brown. In a pot it can be trimmed back regularly, and not allowed to produce hundreds of troublesome seedlings. It makes one of the more palatable herbs teas, and the leaves can be rubbed over furniture to give a glossy sheen and a lemony scent.

Thymes and lavenders always look attractive in pots, and this is the best way to grow them if your garden soil is heavy. Marjoram, especially the golden-leaved form, and the lovely pale green and cream 'Country Cream' also make good container plants.

Tender annual herbs like coriander and basil need to be started off in the greenhouse and then moved to a sunny spot outside after the end of May. Coriander germinates very easily, but has a tendency to bolt into flower if it has any check to growth, so start it off in modules to avoid root disturbance, and don't allow it to dry out. With a little care, even the tiniest outdoor space can be transformed by pots of pretty, intensely aromatic herbs for the kitchen.

NB. Most garden centres carry a small range of herbs. Waltham Herbs grows more unusual species too. They sell at Farmer's Markets and shows around the region. See [www.waltham-herbs.co.uk](http://www.waltham-herbs.co.uk) for further information.

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