

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET



Have Gardening Questions? The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).

Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: mg helpline@masshort.org.

Edible Herbs – Year Round

Whether grown from seeds, cuttings or purchased as seedlings, many home grown herbs can be available for use year round. The most critical element for successful herb gardening is adequate sunlight. If you can give your herbs at least six hours a day of sunlight, you can have an herb garden—indoors or out. With supplemental lighting, you can expand the variety and quality of herbs you grow indoors.

Growing conditions

Many of our favorite herbs are native to the poor soils of the Mediterranean region. They thrive in standard and even poor garden soil. Too much fertilizer will lead to less intense flavor in the leaves. After a full day of sunlight, the second most important thing to provide is good drainage — few herbs can tolerate wet feet.

Many herbs (basil, chervil and dill) can be started from seed, others (oregano, marjoram and thyme) will need a head start as seedlings started indoors or purchased from a nursery. Outdoor winter survival for many herbs is unreliable in New England. The best way to increase the chance of your herb plants returning in the spring is to make certain you have good winter drainage where you locate the garden. A cold frame or tenting of plastic can also aid survival, particularly of woody herbs such as lavender and rosemary.

Because of their drought tolerance, herbs make great container plants. They can summer outdoors and, with a little extra care, can often be wintered over. Plant herbs in individual pots and increase the size of the pot only when the plant becomes too large for its home. A grouping of herbs within a large pot makes container gardening even easier. Plan ahead if intend to winter over herbs — plastic pots can be sunk in the ground. Terracotta containers need to be protected from freezing temperatures.

Always start with clean containers (even new pots should be rinsed before using) and a soil free mix. Garden soil will introduce pests and disease to your planting. Never use a container that does not have good drainage. Water only when dry an inch below the surface — check with your finger. Do not fertilize plants unless they have been growing in the same container for more than six months. Indoors or out, give your herbs regular washings with a gentle spray of water. This will keep leaves clean and discourage many pests. Few insects bother herbs. If you see a caterpillar eating your dill, don't kill it. It will become a beautiful swallowtail butterfly!

Harvesting and storage

Harvesting your herbs should be done in the morning preferably just as the plant starts to form flower buds, when the concentration of oil in the leave is the highest. Handle them carefully — avoid bruising the leaves unnecessarily. You can cut back up to one-half the plant but, unless you are planning on drying or freezing them, take only the herbs you will use within a day or two. Wash them only when you are ready to use them. If you are storing them for later use, wash and pat dry, then refrigerate in a plastic bag with holes. Do not wash herbs you plan to dry.

Dried herbs have concentrated flavor and generally far less is needed in a recipe. It is important to store dried herbs in air-tight containers — zip lock bags or containers with a closeable top. They must be stored out of light and away from a heat source; however, even dried herbs have a limited shelf life — they will lose their flavor after a year or less. Herbs may also be frozen either whole or chopped. Place them in freezer bags or air-tight containers. They may even be pureed and placed in ice cube trays with water, oil or butter. When you need them for soup or stews, just pop a cube or two out!

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>