Herbs in the Florida Garden [1]

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Herbs are plants which are grown for the special flavor and aroma of their various parts. They are used mainly to season, enrich, or otherwise improve the taste or smell of certain foods. Since they are not primary dishes, they are not classified as vegetables. However, due to similarity of their growth habits and cultural requirements, herbs are often included with vegetables for discussion and in the garden.

Most of the common herbs can be grown seasonally in Florida in sufficient quantities for home use. In south Florida, many herbs may be grown in the home garden throughout the year. Since only a small portion of the plant is usually needed at any one time and because the plants are generally small, herbs are adapted to container culture. Their attractiveness as an ornamental plant makes them fit well into the home landscape, either in a border planting, or included in the flower garden. Specially designed formal herb gardens are both practical and attractive. to popular belief, herbs are sometimes planted among vegetables to repel certain insects and other pests. While pest control with herbs is undocumented in scientific journals, this practice will at least reward the gardener with a steady supply of various herbs.

Location and Soil Preparation

Since only a few plants of each herb are required for family use, a small space such as a section of the vegetable garden is sufficient. Some of the herbs live from year to year (perennials), so should be grouped together to one side of the garden where they will not interfere with the

preparation of the rest of the garden. The annual herbs also may be grouped together, away from the vegetables. Such grouping would allow specific cultural practices, such as spraying for pest control, to be restricted to vegetables only. Very few pesticides are labelled for use on herbs.

In general, most herbs will grow satisfactorily under the same conditions of sunlight and soil, and with similar cultural techniques as are used for vegetables. Therefore, check the appropriate vegetable gardening guides for details on soil preparation, liming, fertilizing, and watering. Special consideration should be given to the location and care of a few of the herbs that are somewhat sensitive to soil moisture conditions. Sage, rosemary, and thyme require a well-drained, slightly moist soil, whereas parsley, chervil, and mint grow best on soils retaining considerable moisture. Additions of organic matter to sandy soils are

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particularly beneficial to herbs since they are shallow rooting.

Keep in mind that some of the herbs, especially the mints, tend to proliferate and become a weed if allowed to grow unchecked.

Propagation

Most of the annuals and biennials ordinarily are grown from seed sown directly in place. Perennials generally are best started in plant beds or boxes using seed or cuttings, and then transplanted into the garden or growing containers.

A few plants, such as sage, balm, and rosemary, can be propagated best by cutting. Stems from new growth or the upper parts of older stems make the best cuttings for easiest rooting. Cut the stems into 3- to 4-inch sections, each containing a set of leaves or leaf buds near the upper end. To prevent wilting, place the cuttings in water as soon as they are removed from the plant. A shallow box filled with 4 to 5 inches of a mixture of clean sand, peat, and perlite makes a good rooting bed. Insert the cuttings to a depth of one-half to two-thirds their length in the moist mixture; then saturate the mix with water. Place the box in a protected place and keep moist (but not sopping wet) continuously until roots develop in about two weeks. Continue to water until the cuttings are ready to set out in pots or in the garden.

Such plants as thyme, winter savory, and marjoram can be propagated by simple layering, which consists of covering the lower portions of the side branches with soil, leaving much of the top of the plant exposed. When the covered parts of the stem have rooted, they can be cut from the parent plant and set as individual plants.

Older plants of chive, rosemary, and tarragon can be multiplied by dividing the crown clumps into separate parts. These subdivisions can be set as individual plants.

Mint spreads rapidly by means of surface or underground runners that may grow several feet from the parent plant. These runners, with roots attached, can be removed and transplanted to other locations.

Container-grown Herbs

Most herbs can be successfully grown in containers attractively arranged outdoors along borders of drives, walks, and patios or on porches and balconies. Hanging baskets are especially suitable for herbs. A few can be grown fairly well indoors with special care. Attention must be given to providing plenty of sunlight. The culture of herbs in containers, including soil preparation and fertilizing, is similar to that for vegetables.

Harvesting and Curing

The seeds, leaves, flowering tops, and occasionally the roots of the herbs are used for flavoring purposes. Their flavor is due for the most part to a volatile or essential oil contained in leaves, seeds, and fruits. The flavor is retained longer if the herbs are harvested at the right time and properly cured and stored. The young, tender leaves can be gathered and used fresh at any time during the season, but for later use they should be harvested when the plants begin to flower and should be dried rapidly in a well-ventilated, darkened room. If the leaves are dusty or gritty, they should be washed in cold water and thoroughly drained before drying.

The tender-leaf herbs (basil, costmary, tarragon, lemon balm, and the mints), which have a high moisture content, must be dried rapidly away from the light if they are to retain their green color. If dried too slowly, they will turn dark and/or moldy. For this reason a well-ventilated, darkened room, such as an attic or other dry, airy room, furnishes ideal conditions for curing these herbs in a short time. The less-succulent leaf herbs (sage, rosemary, thyme, and summer savory), which contain less moisture, can be partially dried in the sun without affecting their color, but excessive exposure should be avoided.

The seed crops should be harvested when they are mature or when their color changes from green to brown or gray. A few plants of the annual varieties might be left undisturbed to flower and mature seed for planting each season. Seeds should be thoroughly dry before storing to prevent loss of viability for planting and to prevent molding or loss of quality. After curing for several days in an airy room, a day or two in the sun will insure safekeeping.

As soon as the herb leaves or seed are dry, they should be cleaned by separating them from stems and other foreign matter and packed in suitable containers to prevent loss of essential oils that give herbs their delicate flavor. Glass, metal, or cardboard containers that can be closed tightly will preserve the aroma and flavor. Glass jars make satisfactory containers, but they must be painted or stored in a dark room to prevent bleaching of the green leaves by light.

Sources of Seed and Plants

Seed and planting stock of the savory herbs can be obtained from a number of established herb gardens and seedsmen as well as from many vegetable-seed mail-order firms in various parts of the country. Some dealers make a specialty of handling rooted plants, while others handle both plants and seed. Usually the seed of the more common herbs (sage, dill, fennel, parsley, celery, and chive) can be obtained from local seed retailers, while the less common ones can be purchased only from those specializing in savory herbs. Most herb specialty businesses supply a free catalog of available material and prices upon request. Herb transplants are available at many local retail stores. See Table 1 for specific information on herbs commonly grown in Florida.

Anise

Anise (*Pimpinella anisum*) is a small (two feet or less) annual plant grown for its seeds. Because of its many white flowers, the plant is attractive in a flower garden or as a border plant. In Gainesville, it makes fair but slow growth with only a minimum of care. Start plants by seeding in the spring or fall or grow in the winter in south Florida. Cover seeds one-fourth inch deep; thin seedlings to leave 2 to 3 plants per foot in an 18-inch-wide row (or seed one plant in a 6-inch pot if container grown). Harvest the seeds when they turn brown, separating the seeds from the fruiting structures (umbels). Some drying of the umbels may be necessary first before seeds are separated, cleaned, and stored. Leaves may be used fresh.

Basil

Sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is a pleasant- smelling annual plant with a spicy taste. There are many types, some large and some small, with a range of leaf colors from green to purple to variegated. Basil grows well in Florida and is attractive as a potted plant. Plant seeds of this annual one-fourth inch deep, fairly thick, and thin seedlings to about four inches apart in the row. Plant in the early spring or fall. The green, tender leaves may be used fresh at any time or dried along with the white flowers.

Borage

Borage (*Borago officinalis*) is also known as burrage and common bugloss. It grows well in Florida, producing a large, spreading plant with whitish hairy bristles. It has pretty blue or purple starlike flowers and is attractive in a flower garden. The flowers are used fresh to garnish beverages and salads. In the spring or fall, seeds of this annual should be planted thickly one-fourth inch deep, and seedlings thinned to 6-12 inches apart. The plant has a cucumber-like odor and flavor.

Cardamom

Cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*) is a tropical, perennial herb whose top regrows each year from an underground rhizome. Little is known about culture of cardamom in Florida, but normally it reaches 5 to 10 feet tall with two-foot-long, sheathed/pointed leaves which are smooth and dark green above, pale and finely silky beneath. Small yellowish flowers are produced near the ground, which then form oblong ribbed capsules. Seeds contained in these dried capsules are used to flavor and give aroma to coffee, candies, cookies, and other pastries. Dry the capsules in the sun for three days.

Catnip

Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), also called catmint, is little valued as a cooking herb anymore, although it has condiment properties. Cats like its aroma and taste. Catnip is a perennial plant three to five feet high with square stems covered with fine whitish hairs. The 1- to 2-inch-long heart-shaped leaves have scalloped notches around the margins. Leaf color is grayish green; flowers, formed in small spikes, are whitish dotted with purple.

Catnip may be started from seed or cuttings. In Florida, it grows well from seeds planted in the spring, but is slow to flower; thus, perhaps it would not be a desirable ornamental plant. Thin plants to stand 12 inches apart. Plants may be transplanted to other areas or to pots. The leaves should be picked as needed.

Chervil

Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*) is an annual plant grown for its aromatic, decorative leaves. It resembles parsley in growth habit, but tastes and smells much like tarragon. Some forms have thick roots eaten like carrots. Not much information is available on its adaptability to Florida, but those wishing to try chervil should sow seeds one-fourth inch deep in the spring or fall; thin to stand 3 inches apart in the row. Leaves should be picked as needed to garnish salads, soups, and other foods.

Coriander

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) is a small-leaved flowering annual grown mainly for its aromatic seeds. It is attractive in the flower garden or landscape due to its pretty flowers. Seeds should be planted in the fall, winter, or spring. Cover seeds one-fourth to one-half inch deep and thin plants 3 to 6 per foot. When the tiny fruits turn brown on maturity, generally about three months after seeding, remove them from the plant and dry on a screen. Once dried, the seeds should be threshed from the fruiting structures and stored in a dry, airtight container. The fresh foliage of coriander is also used in cooking, where it is referred to as "cilantro."

Cumin

Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*) is a small annual plant of the parsley family grown for its aromatic seeds. While seldom grown in Florida, it would appear to be adapted since it requires a long warm season. Plant seeds thickly in rows 2 feet apart, in the spring in most of the state, or the fall through spring in south Florida. Seedling structures are harvested upon turning brown; then dried; seeds are threshed and stored.

Dill

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*) is the flavoring plant whose young leaves and fully developed green fruits give dill pickles their name. It is an erect, strong-smelling, fennel-like annual plant reaching a height of 4 feet. Yellow flowers develop into fruiting structures. Dill grows well in Florida, being produced commercially to a small extent and in many home gardens. Seeds should be sown one-fourth inch deep; then seedlings thinned to 12 inches apart. November through December is the best planting time, although it could be planted in the spring. Seeds usually are formed in about 65 days. Fruiting tops may be used fresh or dried, along with young leaves and portions of the stems.

Fennel

The term "fennel" is confusing since there are two kinds. Common fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) is grown for its shoots, leaves, and seeds, used as flavoring agents in foods. Florence fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. azoricum), also known as sweet fennel, fetticus, and finocchio, is grown mainly for the thickened, bulbous leaf base which is eaten as a cooked vegetable. Except for the swollen, above-ground base of the leaves on Florence fennel, the two are very similar in appearance and in their licorice-like flavoring. The plant resembles dill, with narrow, finely feathered leaves, bright yellowish green hollow stems, and umbrella-like seed structures. Sow seeds one-half inch deep in the fall or early winter; space plants 12 inches apart in rows three feet apart. Harvest, thresh, and dry seeds which mature in the second year.

Garlic

Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is similar to onion, except instead of producing a single bulbous stem, it produces a compound bulb consisting of groups of white or purplish cloves enclosed by purplish membranous skin. The leaves reach 12 inches in height and are narrow but not hollow. Garlic culture is similar to that for onions. Suggested planting dates are October through January. Garlic is propagated by division of cloves and planting each as a set.

Ginger

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) is a perennial plant which produces well from Homestead to Pensacola. It is an erect perennial that grows from thick, white, tuberous, underground rhizomes that are very aromatic. Flat, pointed, sheathed leaves are about 1 foot long. Harvest the rhizomes about a year after planting when the stalks die down. After cleaning, scraping, boiling, and peeling, dry the rhizomes in the hot sun for about a week.

Ginseng

American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium*) is also called Chinese sang, ninsin, five fingers, and seng. It is a fleshy-rooted herb native to cool and shady hardwood forests from Canada to northern Florida.

Reports indicate ginseng roots often decay when attempts are made to grow them under warm, humid Florida summer conditions. Ginseng plants are about 12 to 18 inches tall. Each stem has three or more compound leaves, with each leaf composed of five oblong-pointed leaflets.The fruit is a bright crimson berry. The mature root, which is the part used, is spindle shaped, 3 to 4 inches long, up to one inch thick, and usually forked with circular markings.

Ginseng must be grown in shade from seeds, seedlings, or roots planted in the spring. From seeding to harvest usually takes five to seven years.

Many believe the dried roots have stimulative properties. Beverages, such as tea, are sometimes flavored with ground ginseng roots.

Horehound

Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) is a perennial herb, 1 to 3 feet in height, with hairy oval to near-round leaves. It occurs as a weed in many parts of the United States and grows quite well in Florida herb gardens. Seed should be planted in the spring one-fourth inch deep, with plants spaced 12 to 18 inches apart. Seed germination may be slow. Plants can be transplanted, or old plants divided and replanted. Leaves and stems are harvested as needed. One of the main usages is in making horehound candy, which is thought to help relieve throat tickling and coughing. Curing (drying) leaves in the shade preserves the color and flavor.

Lemon Balm

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is a perennial, lemon-scented herb belonging to the mint family. Since mint grows so easily in Florida, lemon balm should do well also. The plants grow in clumps 2 feet high, with bright green, lemon-scented leaves. Plants are started from seeds or cuttings. Sow seeds shallow in the early spring, and space plants 18 inches apart. It may be two years before the plant forms a well-sized clump. Leaves and tender stems are used fresh or dried to provide flavor and aroma to drinks, salads, or other dishes.

Lovage

Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) is a tall perennial herb which smells, tastes, and looks like leaves of celery. Not much information is available on its culture in Florida. Normally, it is started from seeds or transplants, spaced 8 to 10 inches apart in the row. The leaves and stems are used fresh as needed. Other useful parts are seeds and oil extracted from the roots.

Marjoram

There are three kinds of marjoram commonly used as herbs: sweet marjoram (*Origanum marjorana*), pot marjoram (*O. onites*), and wild marjoram (*O. vulgare*) (see Oregano). Sweet and pot marjoram are the ones usually grown in herb gardens. The perennial plants are very similar, except sweet marjoram tends to grow upright while pot marjoram runs along the ground. Space pot marjoram about 12 inches apart in the row, and sweet marjoram 6 inches. Plants can be started early in the spring from seeds, cuttings, or clump divisions. The leaves are used fresh or dried. Marjoram is sufficiently attractive to make an excellent border planting for a flower garden.

Mint

The mints are some of the most easy-to-grow perennial herbs for Florida gardens. Several species of *Mentha* are represented in this group. Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) and peppermint (*M. piperita*) are two of the more popular along with apple and orange mints. Leaves are dark green, small and pointed, with slightly notched margins. Small flowers are whitish, bluish, or violet. Mint should be started in moist soil, using surface or underground runners as sprigs for new plants. In Florida, many of the mints grow profusely in shade or full sun. The leaves and flowering tops are the useful parts, both fresh and dried.

Oregano

Oregano is recognized to be of two main types, Mexican (*Lippia graveolens*) and European (*Origanum vulgare*). The latter is also called wild marjoram. The two types are dissimilar in taste, but alike in usage. The European is much milder. Both types may be grown from seed sown in the spring or propagated by cuttings. Cut the tender tops of both herbs just as flowers begin.

Parsley

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) grows well in Florida gardens. While the curly-leaf type is most commonly grown, the plain-leaf and the rooting types are frequently included in gardens. Parsley is a cool-season vegetable, best planted in late fall or winter. Seeds should be sown one-fourth inch deep, fairly thickly; then seedlings thinned to 6 inches apart. The leaves are used fresh or dried as flavoring or as a decorative garnish. The rooting types are useful as a cooked vegetable, particularly in soups.

Rosemary

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is a small, half-hardy perennial evergreen shrub with a very spicy aroma. Small, narrow, dark green leaves are borne on 2-to 3-foot-long spindly upright stems. Small pink flowers form in the second or third year. Rosemary is better started from cuttings than from seeds. Spot observations indicate that it is adaptable to Florida. The fresh or dried mildly bitter-tasting leaves are the parts used in cooking.

Sage

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is a medium-sized, 2-foot-tall hardy perennial herb with grayish green, oblong, pointed, 2- to 3-inch-long leaves. Purple flowers bloom in the second year. While some difficulty may be experienced in starting sage, it grows well once established under Florida conditions. Sage may be started in the fall through spring using seeds or cuttings. Young plants may be transplanted when small. As with most herbs, only a very few plants are needed for most families. Leaves are used fresh or dried. In the landscape, sage is an attractive, low-growing border plant.

Savory

Savory is classified as summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*) and winter savory (*Satureja montana*). The annual summer savory has been tried more in Florida with satisfactory results, although seeds are slow to germinate. It averages 12 to 18 inches high, has upright, branching stems and gray-green, pointed leaves. The small, pretty, pinkish white flowers make it compatible with the flower garden. Winter savory is a woody but weak-stemmed perennial herb with narrow, pointed leaves. It branches considerably and forms blossoms less than one-fourth inch long. Summer savory is started in the spring from seed, with plants spaced four inches apart. Start winter savory likewise, except give each plant more room by spacing 12 to 18 inches apart. The zesty, peppery tasting leaves may be picked and used as needed, either fresh or dried.

Tarragon

Tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) is a perennial herb with very narrow, pointed, dark green leaves. The plant, which reaches a height of 2 feet, produces few flowers and should be killed back in the winter. Tarragon does not fare well in Florida due to summer heat and humidity. It is not commonly grown from seed, but rather from root or crown divisions. In the spring, set them 1 foot apart. Fresh leaves may be used, or dry them rapidly away from light so they will not turn dark. Store in tight jars to preserve the licorice aroma.

Thyme

Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), a shrubby perennial herb, is represented by a fairly wide variety of shapes and sizes. Usually, it is a small-growing plant less than 1½ feet tall, with very tiny, one-fourth-inch-long, gray-green leaves. Purplish flowers are formed at the ends of the stems. In Florida, start the plants from seeds sown one-fourth inch deep in the fall or early spring, or even in winter in south Florida. In Florida trials, seeds were slow to germinate, and seedlings made slow initial growth. Space plants 12 inches apart. Replant thyme every three to four years for best growth. To use, remove the top one-third portion of the plant when in full bloom and spread on newspaper in a well-ventilated room to dry. Then, strip the leaves and flowering tops from the stem and store in tightly closed containers.