

Wholly Herbs

John Trim FNVS Southern Branch.

I can well remember that as a young judge I would approach the herb exhibits with some trepidation. How I prayed that each vase would have a label listing the various types. In most case's it was not to be and I was left to flounder in a mist of scent and flouncy foliage. With the passing years I have refined my knowledge but I still look long and hard at Dill and Florence fennel, also Oregano and Marjoram can be ticklish to separate. So what it comes down to is not just visual identification but a good nose. It is the aroma wafting up your nostrils that gives you the best clue.

Botanically, a herb is any plant whose stems die down completely in winter. In common usage, the term is generally applied to aromatic plants whose leaves, stems, flowers or seed have culinary or medical uses.

Herbs were introduced into Britain by the Romans. Because of the reputed healing powers the herbs became a focus of superstition reaching a peak in the middle ages when every village had its own witch with her herbs and potions. The culinary use of herbs reached its peak in the 16th century, this was the era of the Elizabethan herb gardens; well stocked with around 60 or more various herbs. In those days a herb garden would also have a range of medicinal plants, Poppies to provide morphine, digitalin, a heart stimulant extracted from Foxgloves and several others for the treatment of various ailments.

These days in British gardens it is mainly culinary herbs that are grown and more commonly it is the big four, Parsley, Mint, Sage and Thyme. However with the rise in culinary awareness adding extra flavours to our food and embracing highly flavoured dishes from abroad gardeners are encouraged to widen their range of herbs.

So now it is quite common to also find Oregano, Marjoram, Dill, Fennel, Tarragon, Coriander, Basil and Rosemary. Which along with a small bay tree make up my personnel arsenal of regular use herbs.

Cultivation of herbs is not difficult, generally they are quite undemanding. If planting in the open garden sense dictates that you should find a sunny spot close to the kitchen. If there is no convenient place in the soil then grow them in pots. There is no end to the range of

planters that are suitable for herb growing, everything from an old Belfast sink to a plastic drinking cup growing basil on the window sill.

Sow seed for half hardy annuals from early March, plant out once danger of frost has passed. Some seeds take time to get going, parsley is well known for this, and it can take up to 6 weeks to germinate. Speed up the process by soaking the seed for 24 hours prior to sowing. I also find purple basil takes a while to make a decent size plant; the green leaf varieties are far more vigorous. Perennial herbs can be raised from seed sown in the spring, although they will take time to make a decent size so I bring them on in a nursery bed before the move to a permanent spot in the herb bed. Plant these out in September into October. If buying in established plants, these can safely be planted out in March and April.

Propagation. All perennial herbs can be propagated from existing stock by cuttings or division. July and August is the best time to take cuttings. Select 4" / 100mm long side shoots of half ripe cuttings. A half ripe cutting is reasonably firm at the bottom but bends easily at the top. Strip off the lower leaves, dibber holes around the edge of a pot containing a mix of 50/50 peat and sharp sand, pop in the cuttings to cover half their length. Give a light watering, place in a cold frame to grow on. It is difficult to state how long it will take the cuttings to root. It is a case of checking the pots every couple of weeks to assess progress. Once they do root pot them on into individual 3" pots and they will be ready to plant out the following year.

You can also take hardwood cuttings of Bay, lavender, mint, rosemary, sage and thyme a little later in the year, late July to September. These cuttings should be 6/8 inches long, bottom leaves stripped off and dibbered into a nursery bed in the open ground. Lift in the following spring and transplant to a permanent position. Be careful with the mint as it can be very invasive. I always grow it in bottomless containers sunk into the soil to restrict its spread. Chives should be split apart every 3 to 4 years so cultivation of these plants is very easy. I also divide large plants of oregano and marjoram and they are quite happy. This is a fast way of increasing your stock.

Some herbs run to seed very quickly which means regular sowing to maintain a supply. Coriander is a classic example. I sow a large 10" pot of this every month. Broadcast the seed over the compost lightly cover with more compost and away you go. Basil is another popular herb that needs repeat sowing to maintain a continuous supply.

Managing the herb garden is relatively easy. Keep the plot clear of weeds, make sure angelica and parsley have plenty of water to maintain vigorous growth, apply a mulch in the spring. Shrubby plants get a hair cut in March and a general tidy up to stimulate the new growth. Remove faded flowers from lavender in late summer and lightly trim the plants into shape.

You will find that herbs are generally pest and disease free. Not much seems to bother them. On occasions I have had carrot root fly attack the parsley. Usually when grown with other herbs the scent is well disguised and the carrot fly go elsewhere. The sages are sometimes affected by powdery mildew but again this is fairly uncommon. If it happens to you pick off and destroy the infected leaves. I don't spray anything I am likely to eat.

At the end of the year you can dry off some herbs for winter use. Use any of the perennial types. Pick the herbs in the morning once the dew has gone off the grass. Tie in bunches and hang upside down in a dry, cool, airy place. Once the leaves are brittle strip and store in airtight containers. To check if the herb is dry enough for storage, place in a glass jar with a tight fitting lid for a few days. If moisture gathers on the side of the jar continue drying.

So if you fancy fish grow plenty of Dill. All tomato dishes are enhanced by the addition of Basil. A Bay or two leaf used when cooking cauliflower will absorb the sulphurous smell sometimes given off by this vegetable. And who could resist fresh mint with new potatoes.

Herbs, another way to further enjoy your vegetables.

John Trim