

## Herb Gardens – Spice It Up!

With the sunshine and warmer weather upon us, it is no wonder that I am thinking about gardening season and its many perks. One of those perks is in the availability and affordability of fresh herbs and spices.

Using fresh cuts of herbs from my garden are a great way to liven up my cooking and make the flavors in each dish more robust. This year, I plan to try something a bit different. Instead of using annual flowering plants in one of my large porch planters, I am planning to create a small herb garden of the favorite herbs I like to use in my cooking. Keeping it close to the house will make it more accessible and easier to care for (I'll save the vegetables for our much larger garden that we use our farm equipment to help maintain!)

Determining what to plant and where to plant the herbs is an important first step. My co-worker, Chuck Otte, serves as a great resource for selecting a location and planning out gardens. That is one of his areas of expertise, in fact. However, I have to determine what I want to plant based on my food preparation preferences before I seek his counsel on the garden planning process.

One of my favorite herbs to use is **cilantro**. Cilantro is a pungent herb commonly used in Asian and Latin American countries that has become more popular in the United States. The seed of cilantro is called coriander, another common spice used in food preparation. Although the coriander seed comes from the cilantro plant, there is a stark difference in their flavor so they should not be used interchangeably. Cilantro, admittedly, is not for everyone. It seems that you either really like it or you absolutely don't. I like to use cilantro in my fresh salsa recipe, my taco salad, and various other Tex-Mex recipes I prepare.

Another favorite that I plan to put in my kitchen garden will be **rosemary**. This plant hails from the Mediterranean and is both robust in flavor and aroma. In fact, when you pick rosemary from your herb garden, you will almost immediately catch the fragrance from the plant without every needing to crush the needlelike leaves between your fingers. This herb is commonly used in lamb, pork and chicken dishes, but is a tasty addition to a variety of vegetables including carrots or potatoes. Using a strong herb, such as rosemary, in your food preparation is a great alternative to adding salt – giving the food full flavor without the sodium.

Admittedly, I like to season with **sage**, as well. This herb's strong flavor can overwhelm a dish, so a little goes a long way. Sage is another herb of the Mediterranean region (northern area) that is a perennial shrub. There are a number of

varieties, but common sage is used most in food preparation. I use sage with pork and poultry, stuffing, and vegetables. Its unique flavor is one that I often use when I am experimenting with a recipe that seems “tired” or bland.

My herb garden would be incomplete without **basil**. With origins in southern European countries such as France and Italy, this herb is a staple in most kitchens. Sweet basil is the most common type used. It is a foundational flavoring in many tomato based sauces and pesto recipes. It can also be used in salads, soups, and sandwiches which also contain various forms of tomato. I have used it in meatballs with sauce to add flavor to the ground beef as well as to the tomato sauce.

**Parsley** is another staple in my cooking. Fresh parsley comes in many different varieties. A curly leaf variety is often used as a garnish to “dress up” and add color to a plated meal. There is also Italian parsley that has a bit stronger flavor than the plain flat-leaf parsley that is more commonly used. Native of the central Mediterranean region, parsley is a universal herb that can be used in a wide variety of cuisines. I like to use it in soup, as part of combination of herbs I use to season steaks for the grill, and with dishes that need subtle flavor and color enhancements, such as a potato casserole.

Since cilantro, rosemary, and basil are all known for their robust aromas and flavors, it seems that I should stay with that trend by planting the stronger parsley variety. I look forward to experimenting with it this summer.

One of the nice things about harvesting your own herbs is that you don’t have to do it all at once. Most of the herbs on my list have leaves that serve as the primary source of flavoring. I can snip a few leaves or a bunch at a time, depending on what I am preparing. When I have time to prepare the harvest for drying or freezing, I can harvest more. If you are accustomed to using dried herbs from the grocery store, you may wonder how fresh herbs are measured. As a general rule, 1 tablespoon of finely cut fresh herbs equals 1 teaspoon of crumbled dried herbs or ¼ to ½ teaspoon of ground dried herbs. It is best to begin with small amounts – adjusting the quantity as needed. Keep in mind that some herbs and spices intensify in flavor as the food cooks.

The key to using fresh herbs and spices is to begin with dishes you like and have already prepared. Once you have mastered using them with these “safe” selections, branch out and start experimenting. We have a wealth of information on herbs, gardening, and food preparation at the Geary County Extension Office (785) 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!