

Growing herbs

Herbs, in most cases, are tough wild plants which, when spoilt by the lush conditions of a garden, will thrive and romp away. It's a myth that all herbs like full sun, even good old basil likes partial shade at midday. So when planning your garden, you can divide your plants into two sections, those like thyme, sage, rosemary, french tarragon and oregano that like full sun; and those that like partial shade, such as rocket, sorrel, mizuna, mustard, parsley and chervil.

When growing herbs in containers, I have two important tips. The first is to use a soil-based compost, either organic or something like John Innes potting compost. This is because there are very few herbs that grow in peat, and a soil-based compost retains moisture which is a must to stop containers drying out. I also advise watering in the morning rather than the evening because this gives the plants a chance if the temperatures are hot during the day, especially for containers grown in full sun. The second tip is to feed container plants weekly from March until September. This keeps the plants healthy, helps them produce leaves, especially on cut and come again salads. I use a seaweed-based feed, however you can use any proprietary feeds that boost leaf production.

Cooking with Herbs

There are no hard and fast rules about the choice of using fresh or dried herbs but use fresh herbs when available. Dried herbs are most suited to dishes which require more than 20 minutes' cooking in order for them to impart their full flavour and soften up a little so when cooking "quick" dishes such as egg or cheese recipes, use fresh herbs.

In general if you are substituting dried herbs for fresh herbs, use one third of the amount of fresh herbs stated in the recipe.

Which herb to use?

Often this is a matter of personal taste however, there are some well known combinations which may help you to choose which herb to use with a particular dish. Also, don't forget the established herb mixtures which have been used by cooks for hundreds of years namely:

"Fines Herbs" - a mixture of equal parts tarragon, parsley, chives and chervil which goes particularly well with egg dishes such as omelettes.

"Bouquet Garni" - which is a mixture of herbs which is tied together for easy removal from a dish. The classic bouquet garni consists of 5 sprigs of parsley, 2 sprigs of thyme, and 1 bay leaf however, depending on the recipe, other herbs can be added according to taste.

Specific Uses of individual herbs

Beef - Thyme, marjoram, summer savory, coriander, chervil, parsley, bay leaves

Pork - Sage, thyme, marjoram, oregano, bay leaves, parsley, coriander

Lamb - Rosemary, marjoram, thyme, parsley, dill, oregano, parsley, mint, coriander

Veal - Thyme, marjoram, summer savory, bay leaves, chervil, basil, parsley

Poultry - Sage, basil, thyme, borage, marjoram, coriander, bay leaves, parsley, rosemary, summer savory, tarragon, mint

Fish and Seafood— basil, tarragon, basil, parsley, thyme, bay leaves, coriander

Eggs and Cheese - Basil, marjoram, rosemary, thyme, tarragon, chervil, chive, parsley, bay leaves

Pasta and Pizza - Basil, borage, oregano, parsley, marjoram, thyme

Vegetables - Chives, coriander, dill, borage, sage, basil, oregano, marjoram, mint