HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

LOCATION FOR A HERB GARDEN

Growing herbs in a garden or in containers on your patio is fun and easy.

Herbs are plants that are grown for the special flavor and aroma of their parts. Herbs are not classified as vegetables. However, because of a similarity of their growth habits and cultural requirements, herbs can easily be planted along with vegetables in the garden.

Most of the common herbs can be grown seasonally in Florida for home use. In addition to their usefulness, herbs make attractive ornamental plants that fit well into the home landscape. They can be planted as a border, included in the flower garden, or in a container on a patio.

The closer a herb garden is to the house, the more attention it usually will get, so planting nearby is recommended. You also will want to locate it near a water source, such as a sprinkler or hose. Herbs need quite a bit of water, and no one enjoys lugging water out to a garden every other day or so.

Find a sunny location for the herb garden. Direct sunlight is not necessary. Bright indirect light from a kitchen window will be enough for some herbs. When planting herbs outside, place them in an area that receives the morning sun. The intense, hot afternoon sun can be too much for some tender herbs.

Most of Florida’s soil is sand, which is not ideal for herbs. Therefore, supplementing the soil with compost and other organic matter is highly recommended, and will increase the soil’s water and nutrient-holding capability. You may want to build a raised bed with brick, stone or lumber and fill it with potting soil, which also will alleviate the sandy-soil problems many of us face. Use a pre-mixed potting soil when growing herbs in containers.

Because only a small portion of the plant is usually needed at anyone time, and because the plants are generally small, herbs are adapted to container culture. Make sure to select a container that has a drainage hole. Herbs do not like wet feet, and good drainage is necessary to keep them healthy.

Another thing to consider when selecting a container is size. You do not want to overcrowd plants, which require room to grow and for air circulation to reduce the chance of pest infestations.

Strawberry pots make great herb containers. You can have many varieties of herbs in one container, making your herb garden portable and easy to maintain.

Select herbs that have ornamental value to you. Herbs that do the best on patios or inside near a bright window are rosemary, basil, chives, various, mints, oregano, parsley, thyme and sage.

Herbs require a lot of water, but one must avoid overwatering them. More plants probably die from overwatering than from underwatering. To decide if your herbs need water, do the "finger test." Put your finger in the soil about one to two inches deep. If the soil is moist, then the plants do not need water. If it is dry, it is time to water. Sometimes the surface of the soil will deceive you. It will look dry, but the soil below the surface may be moist.

Herbs also require fertilizer. You can use soluble fertilizers or slow-release fertilizers. Follow the directions on the label to determine how much and how often your herbs should be fertilized. Make sure not to fertilize too much, as this can be harmful to your plants.

For other gardening information, contact Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday.
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Date: April 25th, 2004