

Growing Herbs in Central Florida

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Growing herbs in a garden or in containers on your patio or in your home can be a fun and easy hobby. Herbs are defined as plants that are grown for the special flavor and aroma. The flavor and aroma can come from any part of the plant, such as the leaves, roots, stems, or bark. Although herbs are not classified as vegetables, they have similar growth habits and cultural requirements and can be easily 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 an herb garden is to the house, the more attention it usually will get, so planting nearby is recommended. Also, the closer to the kitchen the herbs are located, the easier it will be to pluck a few leaves when needed for your dish.

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. Herbs that do well on patios or inside the home near a bright window include rosemary, basil, chives, various mints, oregano, parsley, thyme and sage. When planting herbs outside, place them in an area that receives the morning sun. The intense, hot afternoon sun in central Florida can be too much for some tender herbs.

Most of Florida's soil is sand, which is not ideal for herbs. Therefore, adding compost and other organic matter to the soil is highly recommended. Organic matter will increase the soil's water and nutrient-holding capability for the plants. If you plant your herbs in a raised bed or in containers, use a pre-mixed potting soil. Make sure to use potting soil and not topsoil. Topsoil is mostly sand and won't be suitable for proper growth of your herbs.

Growing herbs in containers instead of in the ground is a common practice. Because 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. Make sure to select a container that has a drainage hole or has the ability to release excess water. 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. When selecting herbs for a strawberry pot or when placing multiple herbs in a larger container, make sure they have similar requirements for water and sun.

Herbs prefer to be watered on a regular basis, but avoid overwatering them. Many plants die from overwatering than from underwatering. To decide if your herbs need water, feel the soil. 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.

As your herbs grow, they will require fertilizer. Use a water soluble fertilizer or slow-release fertilizers. Water soluble fertilizers are mixed with water and are typically applied once every 2-3 weeks. Slow-release fertilizers are applied dry as granulars and are typically applied every 3-4 months. However, make sure to follow the directions on the label to determine how much and how often your herbs should be fertilized. Do not fertilize too much, as this can be harmful to your plants.

With proper herb selection and care, you can be successful at growing your own culinary garden. For more information on herbs or for more information on gardening and landscaping, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm at (321) 697-3000. You may also visit them at the Extension Services building in Osceola Heritage Park.