

# Use herbs to spice up the garden

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Just about every early American home had one. Folks on salt-free diets need one. Everyone who likes to garden would enjoy one.

Answer: A herb garden.  
A culinary herb garden was an integral living part of every colonial household. Fresh herbs offer an excellent, flavorful salt substitute and a great ornamental focal point to any backyard garden. The beauty of an herb garden is that you can get year-round pleasure from a very small garden space. A three-by-six-foot area can produce enough plant material to really spice up your meals.

In order to grow a small culinary herb garden experts recommend that you have four to six hours of full sun, a well-drained soil with a pH adjusted to about 6.5, and a well-mulched soil. A raised bed constructed from landscape timbers, brick or concrete block provides the needed drainage and at the same time creates a defined and manageable garden area. Peat, compost or finely pulverized pine bark added to your soil will help provide the organic matter needed for good soil drainage and nutrient holding capacity. Soil test to adjust the soil to a pH of 6.5 (check with the NCSU

## PLANT DOCTOR

Cooperative Extension Service office at Bolivia for free soil test information).

In the event you cannot soil test, try adding one cup of dolomitic limestone to every 25 square feet of garden area. The addition of a handful of bonemeal or equivalent fertilizer (eg. 0-20-0) will encourage good root development. Thoroughly mix organic matter, soil, bonemeal and limestone to a depth of six inches.

You will get the most enjoyment from your herb garden if you select herbs that will fit your lifestyle. I knew a gardener in the Midwest who enjoyed growing mint for his iced tea. Over the years he had collected dozens of different varieties of mint until his "herb" garden gradually grew to occupy his entire backyard! A sprig of mint in iced tea or a mixed drink is a refreshing addition for summer relaxation. In addition, if the mint bed is placed near a patio or screened-in porch, the aroma is delightful.

Thanks to McCormick, Sauer and other dry herb producers, many of us have become accustomed to the convenience and flavor of neatly packaged dried herbs. However, once you have tried the flavor of fresh, home-grown herbs the pre-packaged dried stuff will become a distant second choice.

At my house, we enjoy lots of pasta and salads. Sweet basil, chives, oregano, thyme, rosemary, dill and chervil are among our favorites. Sweet basil is a prolific annual member of the mint family that can be eaten raw in salads or used in dozen of pasta recipes. Fresh sweet basil is a prolific producer and the leaves can be easily frozen for winter use. Chives are great on everything and also freeze well. In gardens at Williamsburg, chives are used as a border planting (like many gardeners use liriopse) to enclose the herb garden. Dill is an annual member of the carrot family whose leaves and seeds provide excellent flavor to potatoes, green beans and tomatoes.

The number of herb species used for culinary purposes is mind-boggling. In a recent conversation with a North Carolina herb producer, they told me their operation grew over 350 different cultivars of culinary and fragrant herbs! A visit to a herb farm is well worth the time and effort.

We are fortunate in eastern North Carolina to have several knowledgeable herb growers. Margaret Shelton (Shelton Herb Farm, Leland; 919-253-5964), Dick and Sylvia Tippett (Rasland Farms, Godwin; 919-567-2705), and Great Oaks Herbs (Hampstead; 919-270-4119) all offer an extensive selection of herbs and the know-how to get you started with your herb garden. In addition, I have some excellent publications that contain tips on growing a small herb garden and the names and addresses of other North Carolina herb growers. Be sure to send a SASE when requesting these publications.

Send your gardening questions or comments to: The Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia, NC 28422.

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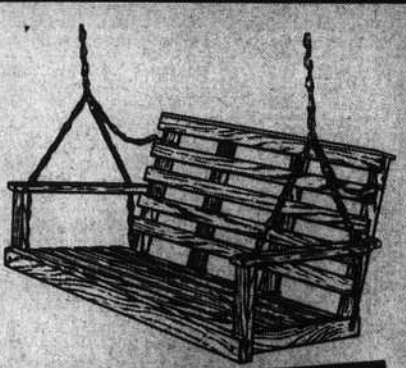


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