

Growing Herbs

Flavoring herbs and potherbs are easily grown in Arizona gardens. They cover a wide range, from wild herbs such as yarrow to tender introduced plants such as basil. Many herbs belong to two large families, the mint family (Labiatae), and the parsley family (Umbelliferae). The following plants have been chosen for their ease of growing and absence of insect and disease problems.

Mint family -- perennials:

Mints are one of the easiest herbs to grow. They are propagated by either seed, root divisions, or cuttings. Give them plenty of room and divide plants every two to three years.



- **Lemon balm** (*Melissa officinalis*): Native to southern Europe, is now found in temperate climates throughout the world. Growing to 2 feet tall, the plants should be planted 18 inches apart. The leaves have a lemon scent which fades when dried. This plant is very hardy, growing in sun to partial shade. It can be used in tea and with fruit, salad, and fish.
- **Bergamont or bee balm** (*Monarda didyma*): Native to the eastern United States, was initially used on a large scale for tea when the colonists boycotted English imports. The plant grows 2 to 4 feet tall and needs frequent watering and afternoon shade. Not as invasive as other mints, bee balm can be propagated in early spring by root division. The long leaves have an odor similar to basil, and when in bloom the plants are frequently visited by hummingbirds.
- **Marjoram** (*Origanum majorana*): Native to the Mediterranean and not frost hardy, marjoram grows well as a potted herb indoors. Because marjoram germinates slowly, sow seeds in early spring. The plants are 1 to 2 feet tall with tiny, grey-green leaves, and grow best in moist soil with full sun.
- **Oregano** (*Origanum vulgare*): Native of Europe, has been included in love potions and used as a nerve tonic. Sow these slow germinating seeds in April. Oregano grows in full sun with average watering. Keep trimmed to prevent flowering.
- **Peppermint** (*Mentha piperita*): Now commonly naturalized, peppermint is native to Europe. Pliny said that mint stimulates the brain and therefore students should wear a crown of mint while studying! It is best to get plants from growers. Peppermint grows in moist soil and partial shade. It is drought tolerant once established, growing 1 to 3 feet tall with purple flower spikes. It can be propagated by runners.
- **Spearmint** (*Mentha spicata*): Is lower growing and more compact than peppermint; similar in other growing aspects.
- **Thyme** (*Thymus vulgaris*): A native of dry, stony places along the coasts of the Mediterranean likes poor, light soils. Seed thyme in spring in a bed that is partially shaded; remove shading once plant is established. Plants become less aromatic after 2 years of growth; replant from cuttings. Caraway-scented thyme, creeping thyme, and wooly thyme are used as ground covers.
- **Rosemary** (*Rosmarium officinalis*): 'Rosmarium', meaning sea dew, is native to the coasts of France and Spain. A rugged, evergreen shrub, it grows 1 to 6 feet tall. Rosemary endures hot sun and poor soil but needs good drainage. Plants are best purchased from grower. To control growth, tip-pinch when small.
- **Basil** (*Ocimum basilicum*): Grown as an annual here, basil is a native to tropical Asia. The Romans sowed this plant with maledictions, believing the more it was cursed, the better it would prosper. Sow in spring when soil is warm; transplant when 3 inches tall. Water regularly, fertilize once, and pinch out flowers.

Other perennials

- **Burnet** (*Poterium sanguisorba*) / rose family: A native to Europe and Asia, is often grown as a bush ornamental. Sow seeds in spring. The leaves grow in rosettes close to the ground, 8 to 12 inches tall, and 2 feet across. Good in containers, burnet grows in full sun and poor soils with adequate moisture.

- **Camomile** (*Anthemis nobilis*)/ aster family: From the Mediterranean, camomile has been cultivated for more than 2,000 years as a ground cover. Set the plants out in spring or fall. An evergreen, camomile forms mats 3 to 12 inches across. Summer blooming, camomile has daisy-like flowers from which tea is made. The leaves are grey-green and fern-like, making it a good candidate for use as edging in the garden. Plant in full sun or light shade, 12 inches apart.
- **Tarragon** (*Artemisia dracunculus*)/ composite family: A native of southern Russia, tarragon has been cultivated for 500 years. Propagate by cuttings or root divisions. Tarragon grows 1 to 2 feet tall; spreads slowly by creeping rhizomes. Plant in full sun. Drought resistant and good as a container plant, tarragon dies to the ground in winter. There are several related species grown as landscape plants: silver spreader, dusty miller, big sagebrush.



Parsley family biennials and annuals

- **Angelica** (*Angelica archangelica*): Numerous medicinal uses have been attributed to the roots of angelica; one that it cures the bite of mad dogs and other venomous beasts. Used in California sweet white wines, angelica likes moist, rich soil and partial shade.
- **Anise** (*Pimpinella anisum*): A native to southwest Asia and northern Africa, anise has been cultivated for more than 2,000 years. It was grown by Charlemagne in the ninth century. Sow seed in spring, thin in autumn. Anise, an annual, likes light soil and full sun. The plant grows to 2 feet tall.
- **Dill** (*Amethum graveolens*): A native to the Black Sea regions, dill was cultivated in Palestine in ancient times. An annual, it grows 3 to 4 feet tall. Sow seed in spring in full sun; thin plants to 18 inches apart. Let plants go to seed and they will come up continuously through summer.
- **Fennel** (*Foeniculum vulgare*): There are several legends concerning fennel -- serpents ate fennel

before they cast off their old skins, and juice of the fennel plant improved eyesight. Fennel requires a long growing season. An annual, sow the fennel seeds in spring in well-drained soil with full sun. Drought tolerant, the plant grows 3 to 5 feet tall. Young fennel leaves and seeds taste like licorice.

- **Parsley** (*Petroselinum crispum*): A native of the Mediterranean, parsley was worn around the necks of Romans to ward off intoxication. As the seed is slow to germinate, soak in warm water for 24 hours before planting. Sow the seeds in spring; plant in partial shade; thin plants to 6 inches apart.
- **Coriander** (*Coriandrum sativum*): Cultivated in Britain prior to the Norman conquest, coriander is native to southern Europe and the Orient. Coriander is an annual, grows quickly, and self-sows. Start from seed in full sun in spring. Plant grows 12 to 15 inches tall.



Other annuals and biennials

- **Borage** (*Borago officinalis*): Native to the Mediterranean, is one of the easiest herbs to grow. An annual with greyish hairy leaves, borage grows 1 to 3 feet tall. It produces blue flowers throughout summer, attracting bees. Propagate by seed in spring; tolerates poor soil, sun or shade. Borage is a good drought-resistant soil cover.
- **Nasturtium** (*Tropaelum minus*): Originally from the Andes, are easy to culture and grow rapidly. Nasturtium grows as an annual herb but reseeds itself. Sow in spring in full sun. Nasturtium like sandy soil and require regular watering. Both dwarf and climbing forms are available.
- **Sesame** (*Sesamum orientale*): Sesame is the primary cooking oil in China, Egypt, and India. An annual, seeds should be sown in spring in full sun. Thin plants to 8 inches apart. Sesame has stalked flowers that resemble foxglove.

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