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## Herb Gardening Tips for Fall

ALL IS A GREAT TIME to plant, harvest, and preserve herbs for winter. While planting is typically associated with spring and harvest with fall, herb gardening doesn't have to end with the first hard frost. Planning ahead, you can enjoy homegrown herbs throughout the winter.

Chicago Botanic Garden's Regenstein Fruit and Vegetable Garden Horticulturist Lisa Hilgenberg categorizes herbs for ease of planning. Annual, biennial, and perennial herbs have different needs. Herbs that can be raised from seed and create their own seed over the course of a growing season are considered annuals. Anise, basil, cilantro, summer savory, and fennel are examples of annual herbs.

Biennials produce foliage the first year, but don't go to seed until the second year. Parsley is an example of a biennial. Perennials are herbs that persist (depending on climate). Tender perennials such as lemon verbena, sweet marjoram, rosemary, and bay laurel don't overwinter successfully in our area, but hardy perennials, such as chives, lavender, garlic chives, French tarragon, garlic, mint, oregano, sage, and thyme tolerate extreme conditions. Most herbs reach their peak of flavor

before flowering, but can still be cut and preserved in the fall.

"Any of the annuals you pot up won't last long," says Hilgenberg. "You may get another three weeks in your kitchen." Hilgenberg recommends sowing basil seeds in light potting soil to raise microgreens for salads. Grow lights offer more intense light as natural light dwindles. For tender annuals and some less hardy biennials, Hilgenberg suggests harvesting and processing most of the leaves.

Martha Corpus of Goebbert's Farm and Garden Center Annual Flower Department in South Barrington concurs, adding that "Any herbs that have been grown in pots could be brought inside, but most will not keep growing well through winter because of dry heat, lack of strong sunlight, and pests such as spider mites." Corpus has overwintered a bay leaf tree as well as rosemary for several years, keeping them in a sunny window with some humidity. She brings pots inside when night temperatures are predicted to dip below 50F.

### Saving the Green

Corpus recommends drying thyme, oregano, rosemary, and parsley to make salad dressing as well as other dishes that are not cooked. To dry

herbs, briefly rinse them with cold water, shake off excess moisture, then gather and tie them in small bunches. Cover herbs that are hanging (leafy end down) with a paper bag that has a hole in the bottom and perforations in the sides to promote airflow and keep out dust. Another way to dry herbs is to place them on a rack and carefully turn them to promote even drying.

For those who choose to employ technology, herbs can be dried in ovens or dehydrators. University of Illinois Extension lists the ideal oven drying temperature between 90–110F which can be obtained by baking at the lowest setting with the door ajar, but it may take 3–4 hours, checking progress and turning herbs throughout the process.

While microwaves are recommended for drying small quantities of herbs quickly, it's important to check the manufacturer's recommendations to keep from starting a fire. Excess moisture leads to cooking rather than drying. Place herbs between two paper towels and microwave on high for 1–3 minutes, checking progress every 30 seconds and turning herbs for even drying. Post-microwave, place herbs on a rack to allow them to cool before storing.

To freeze herbs, blanch one minute, then quickly cool with water, drain, chop, or puree, whirl with oil and vinegar and pour in an ice cube tray. Corpus says dill, parsley, chives, and basil can be frozen without blanching, but should first be rinsed with cold water, chopped, and placed in ice cube trays (before being transferred to freezer bags).

### Gearing Up for Winter

"I have had some herbs (parsley, rosemary, and thyme) keep going until Thanksgiving when we've had a mild fall," says Corpus. "I suppose any of our perennial herbs could be planted in the fall, but they must be planted early enough to get their roots established before the ground freezes." In addition to parsley, Chicago Botanic Garden recommends planting chervil, cilantro, calendula, and nasturtium seeds in fall.

"Garlic and shallots are typically planted around Halloween (after the first frost)," says Hilgenberg. "It's one of the last tasks we do in the garden in fall." Hard neck garlic, which thrives in latitudes with cold winters and dry summers, can be left in ground until July.



Bouquet Garni

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After a hard frost, CBG recommends removing all dead plant material to eliminate habitat for overwintering pests. Diseased plants should be completely removed. Containers should be emptied, washed, sterilized, and stored while empty beds should be covered with 1–2" of composted manure or shredded leaves to prepare for the next growing season. Carefully preserved herbs can be enjoyed until new ones are ready to harvest next summer.

### Cooking with Herbs

Herbs, whether fresh, dried, or frozen, can be used to complement a variety of food and beverages. While the lingo given here is French, herbs are not culturally exclusive, but flavors that welcome us to come together to share something special. "Herbs" technically refer to seasonings derived from leaves. "Spices" come from other parts of the plant such as seeds and roots. For example, coriander seeds come from cilantro plants.

**Bouquet Garni** is made up of generous amounts of parsley and thyme combined with a bay leaf. CBG recommends "adding two or three leek leaves and/or one celery stalk cut crosswise in half, [then] tying the bunch together with kitchen string or secure it in cheesecloth for use in soups, stews, or stocks. Bouquet garni will flavor one gallon of liquid." Variations may include rosemary, tarragon, or oregano.

**Fines Herbes** is a finely chopped blend of fresh parsley, tarragon, chervil, and chives used to enhance omelette aux fines herbes as well as a variety of meat, fish, and vegetable dishes. Note: Because parsley and chervil lose much of their flavor when dried, this mix is best used fresh.

**Herbes de Provence** combines one tablespoon of each of the following: dried thyme, rosemary, savory, tarragon, marjoram, and basil with variations that include one teaspoon of lavender buds, celery seed, or fennel seeds.

**Persillade** consists of equal amounts of chopped parsley (persil) and garlic (ail) commonly spread on lamb with salt and olive oil in Provençal cuisine. U



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