

The 2003 Herb of the Year

Basil

Botanical Name: *Ocimum basilicum* Family: Labiatae

Basil is one of the most popular and widely grown herbs in the world, valued for both its culinary and aesthetic appeal. The aromatic cooking qualities of basil are often associated with Italian cooking, since the sweet basil that we are so familiar with combines so well with tomatoes and garlic. The origins of basil, however, are really based in the Far East: India, Pakistan and Thailand.

About 150 species of aromatic annuals, perennials and shrubs belong to this genus, which occurs in more warm and tropical regions, especially Africa. The most widely grown basil is *O. basilicum*. The name '*Ocimum*' comes from the Greek "okimon" used by Theophrastus for basil. The name Basil has two derivations. One is the Greek word '*basileus*' meaning "king" and the other is '*basilisk*', a legendary reptile which was so repulsive it could kill with just one glance. Both of these terms suggest the power and efficacy that ancient peoples ascribed to basil.

Indian cultures valued basil for religious ceremonies; a sprig of holy basil was often buried with the dead, as it was believed to offer protection from evil in the next world. In Italy, basil was a traditional sign of love. A pot of basil placed on a balcony meant that a woman was ready for her suitor to arrive, and if he brought her a sprig of basil, she would surely fall in love with him.....oh, it should be so easy! Sidewalk cafés in France overflow with planters full of basil and ornamental flowers, making use of basil's power as a natural insect repellent.

Basil is quite easy to grow from seed. Sow seed indoors approx. 4 weeks before planting outdoors or plant directly outdoors after all danger of frost has passed. Lightly cover seed with soil and keep evenly moist, seeds generally germinate in 5 to 10 days. Once sprouted, seedlings will require plenty of light and warm (21°C) temperatures. Plant out in the garden or into larger pots when seedlings are about 4" tall and all danger of frost has passed.

Since basil is a leaf crop, it needs good, fertile soil, but don't overdo it, the flavour comes from its essential oils and too much nitrogen will yield lush growth but low oil content-i.e. not much aroma or flavour-remember a little stress on your herbs is a good thing! Just compost mixed with the soil when planting and the occasional feeding of an organic fertilizer (liquid kelp/fish emulsion or a herb based combination) should be adequate.

Basil is a sun worshiper, and it grows best in full sun in the heat of the summer. Requiring at least 6 hours of full sun daily and most importantly....don't over water!!!! Keep basil plants on the dry side, just watering enough so they do not wilt. Basil is extremely sensitive to the cold and will be the first to go when there is even a mention of the word "frost".

Due to its strong aroma, basil is very useful as a companion plant for tomatoes and peppers to repel insects and basil will increase the vigor of asparagus and it is great to plant around compost piles and doors to repel flies and mosquitoes. It is also very effective when used in insect repellents for both people and animals. Basil plants appear to be only affected by two things....slugs-try keeping the soil a bit drier and perhaps pick a warmer location in your garden (slugs like wet and cool) and Fusarium Wilt-a fungus that effects a number of species of the Labiatae family. It causes sudden wilting and death of the plants. Seeds of many varieties of Basil are now available that have been tested for this fungus. We have also found that by planting the basil in a different location in the garden every year has helped to reduce any pest or soil borne problems.

For the best flavour, harvest basil before the flowers open, once the plants flower the flavour is dramatically changed. You can usually get 2 to 3 harvests per season by only cutting the top third of the plants each time. Stand fresh basil in a water-it will keep for about 1 week this way, do not place it in the fridge-it is too cold! Fresh is best,

when it comes to basil, it is quite difficult to dry and is better if processed fresh into pesto, vinegars, oils, etc. to capture its wonderful flavour and aroma for use all year long.

Dehydrating is generally better than air drying in our climate, the scented basil varieties can be air dried in a dark, warm location for use in sachets, pot pouris and teas. Basil leaves can also be frozen for use in sauces, stews etc., it will turn black, but the flavour and aroma will be maintained. Another idea is to chop 2 cups of fresh basil leaves with ¼ cup of olive oil in the food processor or blender, then pour into ice cube trays. Allow to freeze, then store in freezer bags. Add the frozen cubes to sauces and stews as required or make into a quick pesto by adding cheese and garlic.

Basils are rich in volatile oils, which often vary considerably within the same species and according to growth conditions. Some 20 or more constituents have been isolated, the main ones being methyl chavicol (anise), cinnamate (cinnamon) eugenol (clove), citral (lemon), geraniol (rose), linalol (lilac/orange blossom), thymol (thyme) and camphor. The most widely grown basil for commercial drying and oil extraction go under many different names; Italian, Sweet, Lettuce Leaf, but all have a typically sweet basil aroma.

The medicinal properties of basil (*O. basilicum*), include its use internally for feverish illnesses (especially colds and flu), poor digestion, abdominal cramps, gastroenteritis, migraine, insomnia and exhaustion. Externally for acne, loss of smell, insect stings and skin infections. The oil is also used in aromatherapy and in the perfumery industry, as well as in dental preparations and insect repellents.

Basil with its wonderful aroma and flavour, enlivens many dishes, blending nicely with fish, poultry, beans, cheese and eggs, as well as a wide range of vegetables. Basil even combines well with other herbs including oregano, sweet marjoram, thyme and parsley. It is no wonder that basil is the cook's choice and the most favourite culinary herb in today's kitchen.

Here is a quick guide to some of the more popular varieties of Basil available:

SWEET BASIL- most familiar variety, large leaf, strong flavour, hint of licorice.

GENOVESE BASIL-similar to sweet basil, large leaf, stronger flavour, preferred variety for pesto and Italian dishes.

RUBIN BASIL-gorgeous purple colour, stays true to colour, milder flavour, makes a fabulous opal coloured vinegar when infused in white wine vinegar.

LEMON BASIL-lighter green narrow leaves, pleasant lemon scent and flavour, good for stir fry, teas. Tends to go to seed quickly.

CINNAMON BASIL-spicy scent and dark bronze leaves and rosy pink flowers make this a garden favourite. Interesting for teas, deserts, jellies and used in fresh herb/flower arrangements.

THAI BASIL-green leaves striped with purple and wonderful anise flavour and aroma make this a must for Thai and East Indian dishes.....you will love it!

SPICY GLOBE BASIL-small leaf, bushy growth, great for containers and indoor planting. Excellent flavour and aroma.