

Planning Your Herb Garden

Here is some helpful information from: **KETTLEBY HERB FARMS**

A herb garden does not have to be big to provide a wealth of benefits. It's the idea, not the size that matters. In fact, you will probably get more enjoyment from a herb garden that is small enough to easily care for, but still leaves time for relaxing there, breathing the fragrant air, admiring the plants and anticipating how you will harvest and use them.

Choosing a Site

First determine how much time and space you have to devote to your herb garden. Next decide on what sort of garden do you want—a neatly organized one or more free form. What are you interested in—culinary, tea, aromatic, medicinal or maybe herbs with an interesting history or maybe some of each, perhaps you have a theme in mind—like a colour scheme, a medicine wheel, or a tea garden.

Culinary herbs should be planted as close to the house as possible, since you will want to use them frequently, even plan to grow some in pots in the kitchen for easy access. Some of the aromatic and medicinal herbs grow quite large and are only harvested once or twice per season, so they can be planted further away from the house.

If there is already a place on your property that has been used successfully as a flowerbed or vegetable garden, you could convert all or part of it into a herb garden. The advantage would be that the soil there has already been dug, loosened, amended and weeded. Otherwise consider digging up part of the lawn, anywhere that turf grasses are growing well, is likely to be a suitable site for herbs. The soil should be deep and porous so that the water drains through it quickly after a rain. If this doesn't happen naturally, you will need to improve the soil with peat moss and possibly sand or build raised beds.

Nearly all of the most popular herbs grow best on a site that gets at least six hours of sunlight per day, throughout the growing season. The more sunlight the better. You will need to be able to reach the garden with a hose or watering can from time to time, perhaps daily if you have plants in containers.

After you have chosen a site, mark out your garden with string and stakes. Now walk back and forth and around it, thinking about the two zones of a garden—1. Places where it's okay for people to walk and stand and 2. Beds where the soil has been loosened and prepared for growing plants. If you do not make this distinction clear and provide enough paths and stepping stones to ensure convenient access to your plants—you and everyone else will end up trampling the beds, compacting the soil, crushing the plants' roots and perhaps even breaking some stems. As a rule of thumb, you will need to place stepping stones within the bed if it is wider than 1.2 meters (4 feet) or if it is backed against a fence or wall.

First remove the top grass layer, long handled spades and plenty of muscle needed here. If it is an existing garden remove any plants/weeds by digging them up. Then loosen the existing soil to a depth of at least 20cm (8 inches) and removing all rocks, roots and other debris. A rototiller is great for this, but a digging fork and muscle power will work too! The next step is to cover your entire bed with 5-8cm (2 to 3 inches) of organic matter, such as compost or sheep manure. You can also add an organic fertilizer and bonemeal. Then fork or till the entire bed again and rake smooth. You are now ready to plant.

You will probably find choosing your plants, not digging, is the hardest part of making a herb garden. Avid gardeners tend to have strong backs but weak wills. Choosing a theme is one way to help you decide which plants you will get—culinary herbs, herbs with silvery foliage, lemon scented herbs, or maybe a butterfly or hummingbird garden. Don't be to concerned as to whether they are annuals, perennials or biennials—its value doesn't depend on how long it lives and you can mix them as you choose. It is important to note how big the plant is going to grow so you can allow enough space for it and place it appropriately in the garden. Another way to narrow your selection is by elimination. If you have small children or animals avoid planting any herbs that may be poisonous. If your location is shaded you will need to make sure your plants are shade tolerant. Some herbs such as comfrey, horseradish and mints can become quite invasive and unless you are prepared to either live with that or constantly control the spread, you may want to avoid these varieties in your beds. Mints are well suited for large pots though and much easier to control when grown this way.

Make sure any plants or seeds that you buy are identified by both their common and botanical names to ensure you really have the plant you are wanting. A reliable nursery or herb specialty nursery will be your most reliable sources for plants/seeds and the information you need. Try to find organic plants and or seeds if possible, as you will probably be eating and using these plants. Take a pen and paper with you to jot down any additional information that is often posted on signs at the nursery.

Once you have purchased your plants and/or grown them from seed, you will need to harden them up for a few days before planting them out in your new garden. Place the plants outside during the day in a shaded, protected location-like a porch, and bring them in at night. Do this for 4 to 5 days and then they should be ready to transplant. It is best to wait until you are past your frost-free date for your area before planting them out in the garden.

Arranging the herbs in the garden to create a seamless tapestry of colour and texture takes experience. So for now, just try to give each herb enough space to grow. Place the plants, still in their containers in the garden, then stand back and take a look-they may look small now, but trust me, they are going to get much larger. Allowing enough space ensures proper air circulation, which reduces bug and disease problems, and also provides adequate nutrients for each plant. If you are direct seeding any herb varieties-seeding right in the garden, sow seeds approximately 1-2cm (¼-½ inch) deep either in rows or clumps. Do not seed too thickly or you will have a lot of thinning out to do later. Check the seed package for specific spacing and depth instructions. Now cover with soil and tamp down-firm soil gently over seeds, water well and make sure not to let them dry out. Carefully mark the area that you have seeded, so as not to disturb it when planting your plants.

A few guidelines to help-

1. Simple, symmetrical designs make pleasing herb gardens.
2. Plant taller herbs along the back of a border, next to a wall or fence or in the center of an open bed.
3. Plant shorter or medium-sized herbs in the front or along the edges, where they will be easy to see and reach.
4. Plant creeping herbs along the edge of a bed or beside a path, so they will get plenty of sun and won't be hidden by the taller plants.
5. Most importantly-what you choose to do now, is not cast in stone.

When you are satisfied with the layout-dig a small hole, about twice the size of the container that the plant is in, gently tap the plant out of it's container, place it in the hole and pat the soil around the roots. Plant the herb deep enough that the bottom set of leaves are about 1 inch above the soil. Water well, mark it well with a labelled plant tag and watch it grow!

Routine maintenance of an average size garden (approx. 15 sq. meters or 160 sq. feet) usually takes a couple of hours per week. Weed and loosen the soil around the plants regularly and every 4 to 6 weeks during the growing season adding some organic fertilizer or a small shovel full of compost or sheep manure around the plants will keep the soil in good condition.

When watering herbs it is best to "puddle" them-that is water the base of the plant well until a small puddle forms. Herbs generally do not like to be misted, water on the leaves can encourage mold and fungal problems. Water them only when the top 1 inch of soil is dry, the most common mistake is over-watering. Generally a good soaking 1 or 2 times a week is sufficient and even less as they mature. *However, if you are experiencing a particularly hot, dry spell, you may have to water more often and you will have to water any containers more often as well.

If you happen to have a bug infestation, try using an insect soap spray, it is usually necessary to spray both the upper and bottom side of the foliage to be effective and will probably have to be repeated every 5-7 days. If the problem is isolated to only one plant you can cut the plant back or if severe remove the entire plant before the problem spreads. Remember you are going to be using these herbs so ORGANIC is the rule, try to avoid all chemicals. Planting your annuals in different locations every year also helps to avoid soil fungal diseases and also helps to keep the nutrient balance of the soil.

Keeping a journal of your garden is a great idea. You can keep photos of your garden as it grows, note any interesting observations, keep track of flower colours, time of bloom etc. even when you harvested and how you used it. (maybe some of your new recipes) This helps you plan your garden for next year-what you wish you had more of and what you wish you didn't have! Most importantly, take time to enjoy your garden, smell, taste, feel, you will be amazed!

In the fall adding a layer of mulch or straw over the garden helps protect the roots from the damage caused by freezing and thawing. Do not cut your perennial herbs back-the top growth will also help nourish the roots as it dies in the fall and also adds another element of protection-not to mention the esthetic effect; when the snow arrives they can be quite attractive.

Spring is the time to cut back the plants, most need to be cut back hard or at least all winter killed branches cut out. Lavenders and Sages however should not be cut back until you see signs of new growth on them, then cut off all dead wood and trim back. Once the soil is workable-not mucky, rake out all the dead leaves, stalks and other debris. Loosen the soil around the plants, being careful not to damage the roots, and add some compost or manure around the plants or into the area where you will be planting any annuals. Now you are ready for another season of good tastes and scents!

Pathways, Focal Points

It is not necessary to finish the pathways, edgings and add focal points right away. These can be added and altered as your garden matures or you find just the right thing.

Pathways should be considered and planned for however, when you design your garden, to avoid having to move beds later. Clearly mark out all pathways with string and stakes, make sure they are at least 60cm (2 feet) in width for easy passage and to be able to work on your garden from them. If you do not wish to finish them now, cover them with a thick layer of straw, this will discourage any weed or grass growth and clearly define the path for you.

Some suggested ideas for pathways include:

Grass paths-these are more comfortable on the knees when working in the garden and less expensive than stones or bricks, but it is a good idea to use a sturdy edging to avoid the grass from encroaching on your garden beds. Weeds are hard enough to pull out, grass is worse.

Wood Chips/Bark Chips-these are very natural looking and relatively inexpensive, but you will need to replenish them at least once a year.

Stones- With proper ground preparation and leveling these make sturdy and durable paths. You can collect your own stones-make sure they are suitable for walking on, or purchase inexpensive stepping stones or flag stone. You may want to consider adding some creeping herbs like some of the thyme varieties between the stones to discourage weeds and enhance the herbal effect.

Gravel-Relatively inexpensive and it leaves you the freedom to add stones or brick paths later. It is a good idea to put in adequate edging material to keep the stone on the path and not in your beds. You can use screening which is a fine gravel-this compacts quite well preventing the weeds and grass from growing through. However, it is not very comfortable to kneel on or try one of the decorative gravel stones that are available, they come in a variety of colours and will add another feature to your garden.

Brick-Interlocking brick paths can be their own work of art and really add a unique touch to your garden, but they can be quite expensive depending on the amount of brick you will need.

Concrete- can also be used as long as the ground is level and has been properly prepared and framed.

Focal Points

These are items of interest to accent your green thumb. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination.....but just to get the creative juices flowing here are some ideas-

Bird Bath or Feeder; Fountain; Pond; Sculpture-Concrete, Wooden, Metal, Interesting Plant Container-old wheelbarrow, sink, steel tub; Bench; Arbor; Sun Dial; Decorative Stepping Stone; Stump

Containers

Many herbs are well suited to growing in containers and this can make them easy and accessible, not to mention very attractive and fragrant on a patio, deck, porch or perhaps right in the kitchen. If your space is small or perhaps you live in an apartment or maybe you just don't want or need all the work that a garden requires, containers can provide a bountiful of herbs and satisfy your green thumb.

Your choice of containers is up to you-half wine barrels, window boxes, strawberry pots, planters, hanging baskets, or just about anything that will hold dirt. Materials suitable include wood, clay, ceramic, metal, cement or plastic-these are lighter and much easier to move. Make sure the container you choose has or can have drain holes in the bottom. Container for outside use should be at least 25-30cm (10-12 inches) or larger in diameter to allow room for growth and to help prevent them from drying out too quickly. Place gravel, stones or clay chips over the drainage holes to prevent the soil from running out but allowing the water to run out. Use a soil mix that is 2 parts peat moss to 1 part perlite and 1 part compost or sheep manure for your containers, this blend helps maintain the moisture, but drains well and provides lots of nutrients for your plants. Fill containers to about 5cm (2 inches) below the lip of the container and you are now ready to plant your herbs!

The size of your container and your choice of herbs will determine how many it will hold. For example a half wine barrel will hold about a dozen culinary herbs, whereas a 30cm (12 inch) clay pot will probably only accommodate 1 larger herb like mint or rosemary but 3 or 4 smaller varieties like oregano, marjoram and savory. When you are ready to plant your container, make sure the soil is thoroughly moist, make a hole where you want to put your plant and gently remove the plant from its container and plant in your prepared container gently firming soil around the roots. Once your container is planted, water, label and enjoy!

The two most important issues with container gardening are light and water. If the container is small or light enough you can move it around to ensure it gets the proper amount of light. You will have to check them regularly to make sure they don't dry out, stick your finger about an inch into the soil if it is dry, add water until it runs out the bottom drainage hole. Clustering small pots together and adding ornamental mulch around them is another way to decrease water loss. Placing your container inside another that is lined with damp sphagnum moss is yet another way to slow down the water loss during those very hot summer days.