

Herbs for Indoors

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Many kitchen gardeners love the convenience of fresh herbs at home, and what could be more convenient than an indoor herb garden? Even if you live in an apartment without any outdoor space, you can grow herbs indoors. The ideal setting for an indoor herb garden is the kitchen, where you can snip fresh herbs and use them for home cooking. But herbs can be grown in any sunny room. Here's how.

Find the best spot for an indoor herb garden.

To grow well indoors, herbs need as much natural light as possible. Place them in a sunny spot near a window where they'll get at least 4 hours of sun daily. Windows that face south or southwest are the best for sun, though east- or west-facing windows also will do. North-facing windows are not bright enough.

If you're not sure whether a spot gets enough light, try this test. On a sunny to partly sunny day, turn off all lights and periodically check on the natural sunlight. How much sun does the spot get throughout the day?

Give indoor herbs good drainage.

The best way to ruin a tabletop or windowsill is to let a potted plant drain on it. Likewise, the best way to ruin most herbs is to let them sit in water, which causes root rot. Be sure to use a saucer, liner, or drain pan to catch water and protect your surface. A clay saucer lets moisture pass through, so opt for plastic, rubber, or metal instead.

Clay pots help with drainage, but they can dry out quickly. Try a glazed or plastic container that won't dry out as quickly as clay.

Use a premium potting mix to pot your indoor herbs. And by all means, be sure your pots have drainage holes!

Indoor herbs are happy with typical indoor temperatures.

Indoor herbs prefer the same temperatures that most people do—around 65 to 70 degrees F. At night, temperatures near a window may drop to 55 or 60, but most herbs like that, too. Keep foliage from touching glass to protect from getting nipped by cold.

Basil is trickier. Many kitchen gardeners like basil in their indoor garden. If you have plenty of sun and warmth indoors, basil should thrive, but don't keep it on a cool windowsill. Basil leaves will droop and fade after a short time in cool air. It prefers indoor temperatures in the 70s day and night.

Remember that the air next to a window will be cooler in winter (or hotter in summer) than your average indoor temperature, so adjust your plants accordingly. Dry air, whether from air conditioning or heating, is hard on most herbs, so give them a weekly shower in the sink.

Indoor herb plants will probably stretch and be spindlier than plants in the outdoors, but they will still give you plenty of fresh clippings. Fertilize regularly—be sure to follow directions and avoid the temptation to over fertilize.

Which Herbs to Grow

Growing anything isn't easy (and yes, you may kill off a few plants before you get the hang of it); just start with the simple plants. Here's a breakdown of what to grow.

Easier

Bay Tree: A very slow grower. Be sure you pick up a *Laurus nobilis*, which is best for cooking. A bay tree can become infested with scale if it gets too dry—use dishwashing detergent to wash off the leaves, then rinse them thoroughly.

Chive: Doesn't require as much light as some other herbs. The Grolau variety was bred for growing indoors.

Kaffir Lime Tree: Kaffir lime leaves are often used in Thai cooking. Be sure you give this plant special citrus food.

Lemongrass: Lemongrass is not planted in soil, making this an easy herb to keep in the house. When buying a stalk at your local market, look for plenty of stem and make sure the base is intact. Trim the top and place the stalk in a couple inches of water. The stalk will produce roots and dozens of new shoots.

Mint: Very invasive, so it needs its own pot. Peppermint is great for teas, and you'll only need a little of it. You usually need a lot of spearmint for recipes, so it may not be worth growing at home.

Vietnamese Coriander: Almost identical in taste to cilantro, very, very reliable.

Cilantro and Parsley: Cilantro and parsley prefer cooler temperatures than most—any east or west-pointing window will satisfy their needs. These no-fuss annuals grow best in freely draining potting soil and require little else beyond occasional watering. They don't need much sun, but are a slow grower so may not yield a whole lot.

Lemon Balm

Lemon balm is another easy-growing low-light herb. To avoid the lag time it takes to raise this perennial to harvestable size, buy already-started plants. They do well in freely draining potting soil but need to be watered regularly.

More Difficult

Oregano: Try the Greek variety. Oregano requires six to eight hours of sunlight per day, so a well-lit window—particularly one with southwestern sun exposure—is best.

Rosemary: This herb is very easily over-watered. It prefers to remain on the dry side and does not need particularly rich soil. Several varieties are available; some are bush-like and some are more of a creeping plant. Choose an upright variety like Tuscan Blue or Blue Spire. These will remain more compact, making them a better choice for indoor growing.

Thyme: It will likely need supplemental light. Look for lemon thyme, which has a unique flavor and can't easily be purchased in markets.

Hardest

Basil: It's a favorite to cook with, but it's a tough one to grow. Your best shot is to grow it during the warm, bright summer months. Try Spicy Globe or African Blue variety, the latter of which is more like Thai basil, and does well indoors.

Sage: Sage is susceptible to mildew and is sensitive to overwatering. If you want to try it, though buy the dwarf sage, which is more compact than regular sage.

INDOOR HERB GROWING TIPS

Light

Light is the most important aspect of growing indoor herbs, and many people don't have enough of it to support herbs. Six to eight hours of light per day is optimal.

Orientation: A southwestern-facing window is your best bet for good light

If you can't get light from the sun: Get a few clamp-on reflector lights with compact fluorescent bulbs the lights should be placed very close to the plants, about four to six inches away.

If you see brown spots on the foliage: It can be a sign they are burning, which means the plants are getting too much light; this is a rarely occurs.

If the plants are growing longer stems and fewer leaves: They're not getting enough light and are stretching to find more. Add supplemental light or move them to a location that receives more natural light.

Water

Herbs don't need that much water. Overwatering is one of the biggest mistake trying to grow herbs inside

When to water: You need to learn to recognize plants signals when they're ready for water. A rule of thumb is to let all the herbs dry out completely before re-watering. It could take anywhere from a few days to well over a week before you need to water.

How to water: Put the plants in the sink and water the base where the stem meets the dirt, not the leaves; let the water soak through. Then soak the plants again. Let them drain completely and put them back in their saucers. Never leave standing water in the saucer.

If the leaves are yellow: The first assumption you should make is that the plant has too much water, rather than too little. Feel the soil and lift the container to see if the plant is very wet or dry.

Pots

Rule number one: Your pots must have drainage holes.

What material to use: Plastic or glazed pot have less daring than terra cotta. Terra cotta allows the roots to breathe. The saucer material is not as important, since its main purpose is to protect your counter or windowsill.

The best size: Bigger is better. For individual herbs, the pots should be no smaller than 6 inches in diameter. To grow multiple herbs together, you'll want to put two or three in a pot that is about 10 inches in diameter and about 8 inches deep.

A common mistake is to plant all herbs in one container. This inhibits growth and in the case of an invasive herb so plant each herb in its own container.

Soil

High-quality organic potting soil with good drainage is a must, and it should be rich, loamy, and not compacted.

Feeding

Herbs are fairly hearty, but they still like to be fed a good organic fertilizer like fish emulsion (be aware: it stinks) or liquid seaweed. You're growing herbs for their leaves, not their flowers, so find a fertilizer that doesn't promote blooming. That means the fertilizer needs to have a low level of phosphorous.

Do what the plants tell you: The plants will let you know if they need to be fed: If they seem to have stopped growing, they probably need food. If the plants are turning yellow and you've already ruled out watering issues, this may also mean they need fertilization.

General Tips

Buy plant "starts"; (baby plants), not seeds—growing from seeds is harder. When you're buying plants to grow indoors, buy an herb that's never been planted outside; changing the environment can be traumatic for the plant.

Is this my best side? Rotate your pots every week and don't leave them in the same position forever. Move them around so they don't lean.

They're there to be eaten: Cutting your herbs encourages growth. But don't cut more than a third off at a time.

Don't try to fight nature: In the winter, plants may naturally be in a resting phase because of the changes in light.

Pest inspection: If you see aphids, rinse them off in the sink. If you see scale (it looks like a brown, rusty spot), wash it off with a mild soap or rub off each spot with a little bit of rubbing alcohol, and then rinse the plant.

Assess the roots: Check potted perennials about once a year to be sure the roots aren't growing out of the bottom of the pot. If they are, take the plant out of the pot and inspect the roots: They should be healthy and white, not brown and growing around in a circle. If the roots look bad, trim off and transfer the plant to a larger pot.

Where to Turn if You're Having Trouble

Contact CSU Master Gardeners, they are trained volunteers and can answer your questions. Call the Extension Office at 970-498-6000 or email them at larimermg@gmail.com.