

EVERY DAY HERBS

There was so much interest in the topic of herbs that members asked to have the presentations from the herb luncheon made available to them. These were all done by club members.

This is a partial transcript from that day. Please read and enjoy it; use the knowledge you find there. As always, remember this is from personal research and experience so form your own opinions too.

Gardening with Herbs

Linda McKinney

Herbs have been used since prehistoric times. The cave paintings in France which carbon date between 13,000 and 25,000 B.C. depict herbs. Herbs are mentioned in the Bible in various places and various connections. Ancient Romans and Greeks crowned their leaders with dill and laurel. The Romans also used dill to purify the air.

In the 5th century B.C., Hippocrates listed about 400 herbs then in common use. During the Middle Ages, herbs were often used to help preserve meat as well as to cover the taste of meals that were tainted because of the lack of refrigeration. Herbs also were used to "deodorize" people in the Middle Ages when bathing was not a common practice. During the Middle Ages, herbalists were associated with witchcraft and paganism, and some were burned to death.

Charlemagne, who is regarded as the father of Europe and lived in the late 8th and early 9th century is quoted as saying, "an herb is the friend of physicians and the praise of cooks."

American Indians often used herbs for tanning and dyeing leather. Many of the early settlers grew herbs for medicinal uses and for seasoning their food. Herb gardens were an essential feature of pioneer homes. With more modern times and the advent of the grocery stores, herb gardens became less important as dried herbs were readily available. Herbs have played an important role in man's life all through the ages. Today with the popularity of aromatherapy and the many scented lotions, shampoos, candles, soaps etc., many gardeners are again becoming aware of the joy of raising their own herbs.

What is an herb you may ask! Webster defines an herb as a plant that is valued for flavoring food, for its aroma, or for medicinal properties. Herbs are a diverse group of plants and many are very versatile. Thyme, for example, can be used as a ground cover. Thyme can also be used in cooking (it's great on pork) and it has medicinal purposes. There are herbs that can be used in dyeing fabrics, herbs that are used for cosmetic purposes, herbs used in potpourris and sachets for their scent, some herbs repel insects, other herbs attract birds, bees and insects to the garden. Many people today grow herbs simply because they make very attractive plants either potted or in a garden and have the extra advantage of being useful for flavoring their cooking.

Most herbs grow best in sunny gardens. If you have a sunny site, you can choose from many of the most popular herbs such as thyme, oregano, basil, lavender, fennel, rosemary, dill, cilantro, sage to name a few. There are other herbs that will grow in moist shady sites. These herbs tend to come from wooded areas that have a regular supply of water, but not waterlogged. Among these herbs are angelica, bee balm or monarda, mint, parsley and sweet woodruff which needs the shade to keep its foliage from burning in the hot summer sun. If you know and think about the countries from which some of the herbs come, you can determine if they are sun-loving or require shade. Many herbs can survive poor soil, but few can survive in waterlogged soil. Ideally, they prefer a light open soil that has been tilled and raked to a level surface. The soil should settle for at least one week before planting seeds. Pot-grown plants can be planted right away in prepared soil. Well drained, well composted soil is best.

Just like most of our garden plants, herbs can be annuals, biennials or perennials. Annuals, of course grow, set flower, set seeds and die all within a single growing season. Some easy to grow annual herbs are basil, arugula, cilantro, mustard, nasturtium, summer savory, and dill. However, if you have ever grown dill, you know that it reseeds itself. I have a garden full of dill right now, some of it 7 feet tall, and I did not plant any of it this year. All of it has reseeded each year for the last several years. I just don't pull some of it out because I love the smell of it and use it in salads.

Biennials are plants that sprout and produce leafy growth the first year, then flower, produce seed, and die the second year. Some of these plants like caraway cannot be harvested the first year. Others, such as parsley, because it

is grown for its leaves can be used the first year. Other biennials are angelica, and Queen Anne's lace.

Perennials are long-lived plants. How long they live depends on the species and how well it adjusts to its growing conditions. Some of the perennial herbs grown in our area are the mints, thyme, lady's mantle, lemon balm, catnip, lovage, wormwood, and yarrow. Many of the perennial herbs such as mints, lemon balm, and wormwood should be grown in pots because they are very invasive. Several years ago, I bought and planted wormwood because it has very lacy, variegated foliage and I thought it would be attractive in flower arrangements. I put it into a corner of my vegetable garden. The next year, it had taken over half of the garden. I pulled and pulled to try and keep it under control, and the following year I had to use Round-up to get rid of it.

There is a group of plants called tender perennials which will not survive the harsh winters in our area. However, in warmer southern climates, they will continue to grow for years. If you are willing to bring them indoors, they may last a number of years. Among a few of the tender perennials are rosemary, Spanish and French lavenders, bay, sweet marjoram, and pineapple sage.

For many years, farmers, herbalists and gardeners have thought there is a symbiotic relationship between certain plants. These are known as companion plants. In other words, I always plant marigolds around my tomatoes because somewhere back in my gardening experience, I either read, or my dad told me that marigolds will keep harmful insects off the tomatoes because the insects do not like the scent of the marigolds. Some gardeners plant basil in their gardens because it attracts honeybees which are needed to pollinate tomatoes. Garlic will deter many garden pests. Chives are often grown as a border around rose gardens to prevent black spot. I have read that garlic grown around rose bushes will help deter aphids.

I'm sure many of you have grown herbs for years, but if you are a beginning herb gardener, you may have a difficult time deciding which herbs to plant because of the large number available. Check out your grocery store and your cookbooks, and decide which herbs you use most often. Several of the websites I looked at suggested the following:

Strong herbs--winter savory, rosemary, and sage

Herbs strong enough for accent--sweet basil, dill, mint, sweet marjoram, tarragon, and thyme

Herbs for blending--chives, parsley, summer savory

When designing an herb garden, there are many different ways you can go. When beginning or if you have limited space, perhaps just a patch outside your kitchen door for cooking purposes or a couple of pots on the deck filled with herbs. My introduction to herbs was when I visited the Craig Bergman gardens in Winthrop Harbor and fell in love with the variety of herbs all planted in one big pot. I bought the individual herbs, came home and attempted to recreate the Bergman pots.

If you are a gardener who likes projects or challenges, a formal herb garden may be to your liking. A formal garden has a series of beds of herbs with pathways woven around the beds. It should be balanced and complimentary in sizes and colors of the herbs. Think of the English knot gardens.

Another way to use herbs is to intersperse the herbs among your flowers, shrubs and other plants. That way, something is always blooming and your garden will continue to draw raves from your friends.

But it is your herb garden and you should use it and enjoy it.

HERBS, HERBS

Sandi Shea

Have you seen the movie "Julie and Julia"? Even if you haven't, I'll bet you know who Julia Child is. She is one who definitely increased interest in cooking with herbs. I'll try to explain a little bit about harvesting, using and preserving herbs.

The word 'herb' originated from the Latin word, herba, meaning grass. This Medieval Latin word 'herba angelic' means "angelic herb". The first written records about herbs were back in 3,000 B.C.

Most herbs are best added to a dish during the last five or ten minutes of cooking, or even as a last-minute garnish. Heat is very unkind to the essential oils that give herbs their taste, and prolonged

cooking will reduce even the most pungent herb to a mere shadow of itself. Dried herbs can tolerate a little more time on the fire because they must undergo a rehydration process before they begin to lose their unique flavors, but the same rule applies—the less time they are cooked, the better.

Harvest:

The first rule is *“Grow what you’ll use rather than trying lots of new things all at once”*. The second rule is *“Make it convenient—close to the house and easy to reach in the garden.”* If you remember those 2 things, you will find that growing your own herbs is easy and fun.

After herbs start growing, harvest whenever you want as long as you leave part of the plant to regrow.

For the best flavor, harvest your herbs before they bloom. If you see blossoms forming, cut them off and don’t let them open.

Pick the herbs when the leaves are young and tender for the best flavor and fragrance. You will get better tasting herbs if you pick the young leaves several times during the season rather than waiting till the whole plant is mature.

✚ Most herbs benefit from pretty severe pruning. Basil especially likes to be **pruned down to a node** or joint with leaves on either side. It will then regrow full and bushy. Parsley, thyme, oregano, sage, bay leaf among others all get fuller with pruning.

If you are using the flowers themselves, (like garlic, oregano, lavender, roses, chives or almost all herb blossoms) pick them when they are not quite in full bloom or on the very day when they first open their petals.

The concentration of oils that give herbs their flavor and aromas is strongest when the plant is cool. Therefore morning is the best time to harvest especially for preservation but even for the evening meal.

✚ To store them for a few days, rinse or not as is your preference. If you do wash them, make sure to dry them well with paper towels or even in a salad spinner. Then **lay them on a paper towel and gently roll it up**. Put them in a Ziploc bag and refrigerate. I usually close it most of the way.

- ✚ The only herb that benefits from rinsing is parsley—keeps it from wilting as fast.

Basil can be put in a vase or glass of water and sit several days on your counter; sort of an edible bouquet.

Using:

- ✚ Most herbs you use only the leaves. Parsley and cilantro are exceptions—the tender stalks are flavorful too so you can use them as well as the leaves.
- ✚ Plants with woody stems like thyme, oregano and rosemary: Strip the leaves backward off the stem. The stems can be thrown on the grill fire for aromatic flavoring. Heavy rosemary stems can be used as skewers for meat or veggies.
- ✚ Some you use for flavoring and then remove, such as bay leaves which are too woody to eat. Same thing if you use whole sprigs of thyme.
- ✚ You can make a bouquet garni which is simply wrapping the herbs of your choice in cheesecloth and tying it shut. Leave a long string to dangle out of the pot so it's easy to remove.

The traditional bouquet garni is parsley, thyme and bay leaf.

So you've got all these leaves.....now what do you do? Well, that's easy. Chop them up.

- ✚ Demonstrate chiffonade for basil
- ✚ Demonstrate rocking chop for thyme
- ✚ Demonstrate ulu block with rosemary

Can also use mortar and pestle, food processor or blender

Just choose your weapon based on how you will be using the herb....flavoring, garnish, sauce, etc.

Preservation Drying

When you think of herbs, most people immediately think of the bottles on the spice shelf. And indeed that is the form most of us are familiar with—dried herbs.

Herbs you have grown and dried yourself will have much more flavor than commercial ones. Oregano, thyme, dill, marjoram, various mints, bay leaf and sage are excellent done this way.

- ✚ One of the easiest ways to do it is to simply tie or rubberband a numbers of sprigs together at the bottom, hang them upside down in a dry spot and wait a week or two. You can cover them with a paperbag or cheesecloth to keep the dust off.

When they are thoroughly dry, you can strip the leaves off and put them in old spice bottles or jars you can close tightly or even Ziploc bags. Store in a cool dark place—not the back of your stove.

You can also lay herbs out on screens or racks covered with cheesecloth to dry. Just make sure they are not clumped up and stir them a few times to prevent them from molding.

And dehydrators work too if you have one, although some people say even that small amount of heat causes flavor loss.

- ✚ Another form of drying is salt curing. Simply layer rosemary stems with leaves in a jar with salt. They will be preserved all year without getting too crispy—you'll still be able to chop them without having rosemary fly all over the kitchen. And the bonus is the salt will be rosemary flavored which is great for cooking.

I have read you can do this with basil too but have not yet tried it.

- ✚ If you want a stronger flavored rosemary salt, just put coarse salt and rosemary in a food processor and chop it to the consistency you like. It's wonderful on potatoes, pork, wherever you would use salt and rosemary.

The water is gone from your herbs now so they are much more concentrated. So use 1/3 to 1/2 the amount you would use of fresh herbs. By the same token, if your recipe calls for dried herbs and you're using fresh, at least double the amount.

Freezing

There are a couple reasons to consider freezing some herbs. Sometimes it's just easier and some herbs don't dry well; they lose too much flavor and color. Some that are better frozen are basil, chives, cilantro, fennel, lovage and parsley.

Most herbs have plenty of oil in them so you can just freeze them without any other preparation. If you don't have too much, simply chop them and put them in a thin layer in a freezer bag and freeze. Just break off a bit when you want to use them.

To make it more convenient for cooking, you may want to chop your herbs and spread them in a thin layer on a cookie sheet to freeze. Then pour them into freezer bags or jars for storage—the chopped pieces remain separate so you can take out exactly the amount you want.

Just don't forget to label them so you know what it is when you pull it out of the freezer.

Basil and lovage are the exception to this. They should be blanched in boiling water for 15 sec-1 minute; then quickly cool in ice water. Dry in paper towels and chop and freeze.

To retain the best flavor and color, freezing in oil is suggested. Cilantro is especially good this way, but it works for others too. Again chop your herbs, (you can use a food processor) then mix in enough oil to make a paste. Use either olive oil or canola oil depending on your preference for the herb. Then put the paste in ice cube trays and freeze. Once solidly frozen, pop them out and put in bags or containers. To use, just drop into whatever you're making.

You can also freeze herbs like that but in water. Put your chopped herbs in the ice cube trays, cover with water and freeze. Again store in closed containers and use as you like. If you freeze

your basil and lovage in water, you can use boiling water to fill the trays and you don't have to bother blanching.

I would suggest if you use plastic ice cube trays, you reserve them for that only because they sometimes retain the herbal taste.

When using frozen herbs, measure them as if they are fresh since they have retained most of their water.

- ✚ Another way to freeze some herbs such as parsley that you will use in soups and stews is to lay them in bunches on sticky wrap like Press&Seal, put another on top, seal around each bunch and freeze. When frozen, roll up and store in freezer bags. Then cut a bunch off when you make your soup or stew.

We can't talk about freezing without mentioning pesto. This is usually made with basil or basil and parsley, but you can use any herbs you like. Just chop the herbs with garlic, toasted nuts, a parmesan type cheese, and olive oil in a food processor to a paste consistency. Lay it in a tube shape on 2 layer of Saran type wrap, then roll it up and freeze on a cookie sheet. When it is frozen, cut it into chunks of the size you normally use and store it in containers or freezer bags.

OILS

I'm sure you're wondering about those lovely herbal oils you see. Well, you can make your own, but you must be careful because of botulism. The organism that causes it lives in air-free environments like oil.

- ✚ So here's what you do. If you are using garlic or peppers or any veggie like that, first soak it 8-24 hours in vinegar to curtail bacterial growth. Strain the veggies from the vinegar and put them in a sterile bottle along with the herb which you have blanched in boiling water. Then add your oil of choice, usually a good olive oil. Make sure to refrigerate this oil.
- ✚ It may solidify or get cloudy, but just run hot water over the bottle and it will clear right up. Use it within 2-3 weeks to be safe.

VINEGARS

Herbal vinegars are another way to save your herb flavors to use throughout the winter—and they make beautiful additions to your kitchen. The acid in the vinegar draws out the essential oils in the herbs, giving the final product a wonderful flavor. You can use them in any recipe that calls for vinegar and some that call for lemon.

Red and white wine vinegars are the usual choice, although you can use cider vinegar for some herbs like dill. Or rice vinegar for delicate herbs.

Heat your vinegar, but don't boil it. Bruise the herbs and put them in a glass jar. Steep it for about 2 weeks in an area where the light can penetrate the vinegar. Then strain it and store it in glass containers, but don't use metal lids as the vinegar will corrode them. You can add a few sprigs of fresh herbs when you bottle the vinegars to make a lovely bottle to display.

Various

These are just a few uses and ways to preserve herbs. Here's SOME of what we haven't mentioned: Teas, jellies and honeys, blends and butters, cosmetic uses, potpourri, herb bouquets, flower arrangements, insect repellants—to name a few.

I hope this has whetted your appetite for herbs and all the things you can do with them. They are fun, fragrant, delicious and good for you. And very easy to grow and use—so give it a try.

 *Demonstration*

Highlight: Items or methods shown