

PLANNING A HERB GARDEN

There are numerous styles of herb gardens to choose from and, in most cases, the style of the house and the rest of the garden will be a major influence. Formal and circular herb gardens have been features of the great gardens throughout Europe but herbs are also stunning additions to patios and entertainment areas when planted in tubs and planter boxes. Perennial borders filled with perfumed herbs are wonderful when their fragrance is released as they are brushed past and many have such wonderful foliage that they can be incorporated into the landscaping just for their colour.

Selecting and Preparing A Site

After deciding on the style of herb garden, it's then necessary to choose the best site. Positions close to the kitchen are ideal for a cooks' garden but consideration of the needs of the plants is also important.

Herbs with small, tough leaves such as rosemary, lavender, thyme and santolina cope extremely well in full sun and very free-draining soil and will also manage with strong ocean winds. In fact, these harsh conditions will develop the oils within the leaves and so improve their flavour and aroma. These plants will still do well in a touch of shade or with a little more dampness but will not be as high in oil content.

Herbs that have leaves that are larger and lush such as basil, coriander, parsley and mint have a high water content and so need a rich, damp soil that has been built up with compost to a depth of about 30 centimetres. These plants prefer a touch of shade and a little more shelter and will thrive with regular applications of liquid organic fertiliser.

Choosing and Placing the Herbs

There are hundreds of plants that are considered herbs and choosing them for your garden can be confusing. Consider following these simple steps to get you started:

- Plan and plant perennials such as rosemary, lavender and thyme first so that, as the annuals die down, the garden still has the structure of these established plants.
- Select the herbs that you use the most, possibly basil, parsley and chives, so that you can start harvesting from your garden straight away.
- Plant a border of just one herb variety around the edge of the garden to add a touch of style and to help protect the other plants from insects. Parsley borders in garden beds or large pots are a very big trend in the east. Salad Burnet forms a soft perennial hedge that also works as a snail trap. Thyme hedges help to deter various insects from the herb garden and Columnar Basil or lemon grass can be used as a taller hedge of about 1 metre that will deter white fly.
 - Some herbs should stay in pots making them ideal features for amongst the herb garden. Most mints are best in large pots as they can be invasive. French Tarragon is also best in a pot as it dies right down in winter and sometimes gets lost or accidentally dug up.
- Once the structure of your herb garden is underway, add some of the herbs that you may not have used before but which suit your cooking or lifestyle. Vietnamese mint and lemon thyme are fantastic for those that love Asian cooking or Pizza Thyme and Rocket for those that do a lot of outdoor cooking. Perhaps some of the perfumed herbs such as Corsican mint, Chocolate Mint or Lawn Chamomile will add a touch of romance to the garden.

Fertilising

Herbs are generally tolerant of most conditions and will provide a good harvest with very little effort but fertilising these plants periodically will definitely produce better results.

Manures and composts mixed through the topsoil of the herb garden will provide much needed nutrients and encourage microbial activity.

Liquid fertilisers applied once a fortnight to the soft, lush herbs such as basil, parsley and coriander will encourage them to produce more leaves after harvesting. The general rule with these herbs is that the more they are harvested, the more they should be fed.

Thin leaved herbs with a high oil content such as rosemary and thyme have a better flavour if they are not overfed, so all that is required is an application of controlled release fertiliser twice a year.

Fortnightly applications of a seaweed extract on all of the herb garden is highly recommended as it thickens the cell walls of the plants, helping to protect them from transplant stress, weather conditions and insect and fungal attack. Also, seaweed extract is safe to use on edible crops such as herbs.

Insect Problems and Diseases

Many herbs will actually work to repel insects within the garden and are often used in companion planting for this very purpose. For example, basil is worth planting throughout the garden as it repels both white fly and mosquitoes.

Although most herbs don't seem to have too many problems with insects, some herbs are prone to the same pests and diseases at the same time every year. Fortunately these are very easy to control safely.

All of the mint varieties can be affected by rust during winter. Rust is obvious from small, bronze lumps under the leaf which, when they erupt, will release thousands of spores that will then infect the other mints. Luckily, this rust doesn't seem to affect other plant varieties. The best method of controlling mint rust is to cut the mint almost down to soil level, throwing all leaves into the bin (not the compost) to make sure no further spores are released in to the garden. Then cover the top of the pot with a thin layer of potting mix, add a little controlled release fertiliser and water with seaweed extract. This breaks the cycle of the rust and the mint will grow back thicker and stronger than ever. This trick also works with Lemon Balm that has been affected by Two Spotted Mite.

Another problem that occurs seasonally is caterpillars, obvious from the holes that they cause in the leaves. Spraying with products such as Dipel or Success will not only help to control the caterpillars but are also safe to use on edible crops. Ask a Waldecks Horticulturalist for more information on using these products.

Harvesting and Maintenance

Many people leave their herbs until they have grown to full size before they start harvesting them but herbs will grow stronger and with a better shape if they are continually harvested, even when they are quite small. As the herbs are being harvested they are also being tipped and pruned and this is an ideal way of keeping them compact and full of fresh new growth.

Woodier herbs such as rosemary, lavender and thyme need to be pruned quite hard. In general, a third off the top after flowering and two-thirds off in early spring is perfect. This helps to stop that woody growth that is often seen at the base of these plants and it is better to do a bad job of pruning them than not to do anything at all.

Herbs such as oregano, sage and thyme can tend to hollow out in the middle in winter but this is easily overcome by mounding. This technique involves mounding a 20 centimetre deep pile of good quality compost over the centre of the plant so that the middle is covered but the growth on the edge of the stems is still above the soil. The tougher stems below the soil will produce roots and the plant will grow back thicker and stronger than before. These plants can even be divided once they have started to re-establish.