

Herbs for Montana Gardens

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Advice for growing culinary herbs in Montana gardens.



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THE GENERAL TERM “HERB” APPLIES BROADLY

to any herbaceous plant. It means different things to different gardeners. Some herbs are used for medicinal purposes, some for culinary projects. Others are used for their valuable dyes. Because of the broad scope of plants included in the category of “herbs” there is not a single procedure for growing all herbs. Instead, each has its own cultural requirements. Following are short discussions of many popular culinary herbs that will grow in Montana. The list is illustrative and not exhaustive. These herbs may not grow equally well in all parts of the state.

Anise

Pimpinella anisum L.

Anise is an annual that grows up to two feet tall, with leaves and seeds that have a sweet licorice taste. The Greek physician, Hippocrates, recommended it for indigestion. Pliny used it to freshen his breath and the Roman government considered it a negotiable commodity used to pay taxes. By the sixteenth century the herb was used to bait mouse traps. Now we use the seeds to flavor cakes and cookies and the leaves in salads.

Plant anise seeds in pots in early spring, keeping the seeds and seedlings at a temperature of at least 70° F. Set the plants outdoors in a well-drained soil and full sun after danger of frost. Anise transplants poorly so disturb the root system as little as possible. Do not over fertilize the plants.

Cut and use some of the leaves as soon as the plant is large enough. The plant will bloom by midsummer and by fall you should find several seed clusters, each containing 6 to 10 seeds. Harvest the gray-brown seeds from the fully ripened seedheads before they shatter and spread them on a sheet of paper to dry in the sun. Store them in a tight container.

Arugula

Eruca vesicaria subsp. *sativa*

This popular annual has been grown in the Mediterranean area for centuries and was an especially popular salad green among the Romans, Greeks, and Turks. It is found throughout the Mediterranean area and has become naturalized in areas of North America. It was grown in American gardens before 1850.

Sow seed in spring into moist, fertile soil in full sun or partial shade. Growing plants in cool, moist, fertile soil will yield more tender leaves, while plants grown in dry, hot, less fertile soils produce more pungent leaves. The plant will often self-sow so may get out of bounds. Harvest the leaves before appearance of the flower stalk. Flowers and flower buds are harvested as needed.

The leaves are used as salad and are a main ingredient in French mesclun. They are also added to stir fries, sauces, and soups. The flowers and flower buds provide a peppery zip to salads.

Basil

Ocimum basilicum

This is the most widely grown of 35 species of basil and has been used in medicine and cooking to flavor soups and stews for centuries. It is grown as an annual, and will reach a height of about 18 inches.

Basil is native to India where it was held sacred and was thought to protect one from evil; pots of the herb were placed in temples for this purpose.

The Romans regarded the plant with superstition and felt that the more it was cursed, the better it grew. By the Middle Ages herbalists thought the plant so evil as to be a good remedy for bee stings. In modern Italy, though, the plant is regarded as a sign of love. It was first cultivated in Britain in 1548 and reached the U.S. before 1806.

Basil



The species is highly variable in color and fragrance. The delicately scented cultivar 'Dark Opal' has purplish-black leaves, while the green-leaved 'Genovese' is considered best for flavoring tomato and garlic dishes. 'Horapha', 'Glycyrrhiza', and 'Thai', frequently used in Southeast Asian dishes, have purple-tinted leaves and a sweet licorice aroma. 'Napolitano' is a favorite for pesto dishes, while 'New Guinea' has purple-tinted leaves with a strong cinnamon/licorice flavor. 'Green Bouquet' has a spicy, clove fragrance. Basil variations are legion.

Start seeds in early spring, and set the plants in the garden, about a foot apart, after danger of frost. Basil does best in full sun in rich, light, well-drained soil that is at least 55° F. Pinch the growing tips a few times to promote branching and stockiness in the plants. Locate plantings in a warm spot as basil performs poorly in cool, damp areas.

Harvest the plant just before flowering by cutting the main stem down to the bottom node or two. The remaining growth will branch and provide another cutting in a few weeks if your season is long enough. Pinch the leaves from the stems and dry what you cannot use fresh in a shady, ventilated area. If leaves are not dried within three days, finish the process in a warm oven. Finish harvesting before the first frost.

Bee Balm

Monarda didyma

Also called bergamot and Oswego Tea, this herb became a patriot's substitute for tea following the Boston Tea Party. The herb was grown to a considerable extent in Oswego County, New York, by the Shakers in the late 1700s. The entire plant emits a strong citrus-like scent. This is a perennial that grows up to four feet in height with red, white or lavender flowers. Starting from seeds may be unsatisfactory, so try to find a plant or start your own from crown division of a neighbor's plants. Plant in full sun in fertile soil high in organic matter. A top dressing of compost in early spring and an organic mulch in summer will keep them healthy. The plants spread rampantly, so divide them every few years, replanting only the younger, outer roots about 2 feet apart and discarding the old, inner ones. Support the tall stems in windy areas. To keep the planting healthy, cut the stems to within an inch of the ground as soon as the bottom leaves have begun to turn yellow. Strip the leaves from the stems and dry them in a shady spot within 2 to 3 days. A longer drying period reduces the quality of the final product.

Catnip

Nepeta cataria

Catnip was cultivated long-ago in the old Roman town of Nepeti, from which the genus name derives. The early colonists brought this herb to America and by 1796 it was being grown as a commercial crop. It has now escaped from cultivation and can be found growing wild near abandoned homesteads. The plant is a perennial mint hardy to zone 3 and may reach heights of 18 to 30 inches.

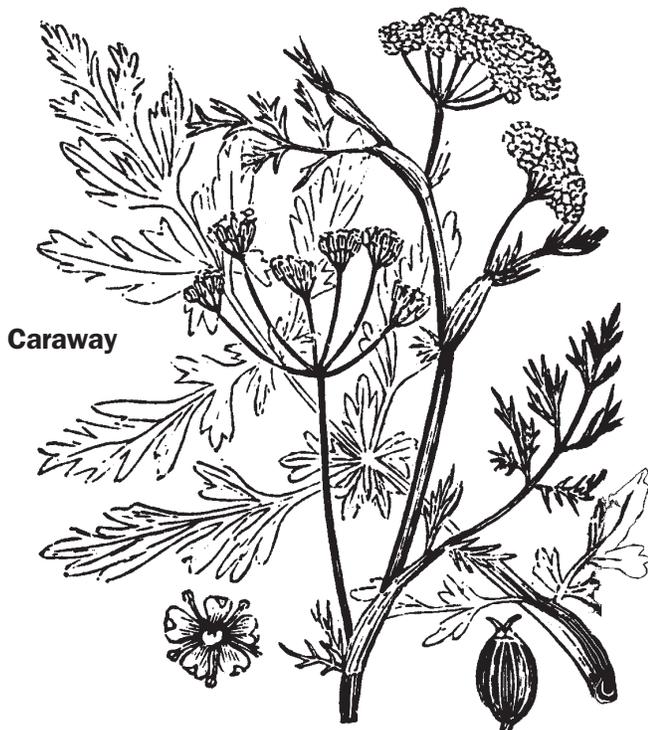
Transplant seedlings in full sun to light shade and in well-drained soils, spacing the plants about 12 inches apart. Harvest the young leaves and flowers when they are fully opened and well-colored, before they brown. Dry them rapidly in a shady spot.

Note that the plants may spread rapidly in the garden and will have to be thinned or kept in bounds with edging material.

Caraway

Carum carvi L.

This biennial is started from seed planted in the garden about one inch deep in early spring. Thin the seedlings to stand about a foot apart in the row. Caraway does not tolerate transplanting well. The first year the plant will produce a bushy top, over-winter and the seeds will mature from mid-to-late summer of the second year, so you'll have to plant some each year to keep a steady supply. Cut the seed heads from the plant as soon as they



Caraway

turn brown. Leaving them too long will allow them to shatter. Tumble or gently thresh the seeds from the seed heads and dry them in the hot sun. Store the seeds in a paper bag or closed container.

The roots of caraway, as well as the seeds, are a delicacy, prepared and eaten as you would carrots. The leaves also can be chopped up and used to flavor stews and soups.

Chicory

Cichorium intybus

Chicory is used as a salad crop and a root crop. The dried roots are ground and used as an adulterant for coffee. This plant needs approximately 120 frost-free days and should only be grown in the warmer areas of the state.

In fall, after frosts but before the ground freezes, dig out entire roots and cut the tops off about two inches above the roots. Store the roots in a cool, moist cellar or in pits. After this short, cool period you can force the roots by moving them into a dark place with a temperature of 50° to 60°F and covering them with damp sand. Keep the media moist and harvest the pale yellow or white shoots when they are about 3 inches long.

Chives

Allium schoenoprasum

This perennial is a member of the onion family that grows up to 10 inches high and produces violet-colored flowers. It grows wild in northern Europe, Greece and Italy and the ancients familiar with it thought that it damaged the brain.

Chives are perennial and hardy to zone 3. Grow them outdoors or as house plants. Outdoors they should be thinned every three to five years by dividing the clumps of bulbs in the fall after the tops have died back, or in the early spring before growth resumes. Cut and use the tender leaves or the entire plant anytime. The chopped leaves lend their delicate onion flavor to many foods. Chives self-seed and may become invasive.

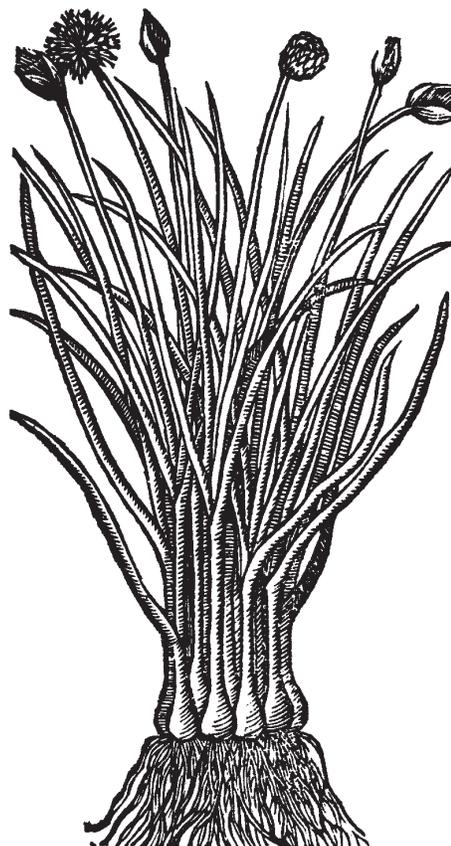
Coriander (Cilantro)

Coriandrum sativum

Coriander is an erect annual, about 20 inches in height with finely divided, pungent leaves. It is native to the eastern Mediterranean but has become naturalized over much of North America. The roots are used in Thai cooking and the leaves are used to flavor soups, salads, and curries. The seeds are used in curries, pickling, sausages, sauces, and Greek cuisine. Seeds were used by the Romans as a spice and the plant was well-known in Great Britain more than a thousand years ago where it was used in medicine and cooking.

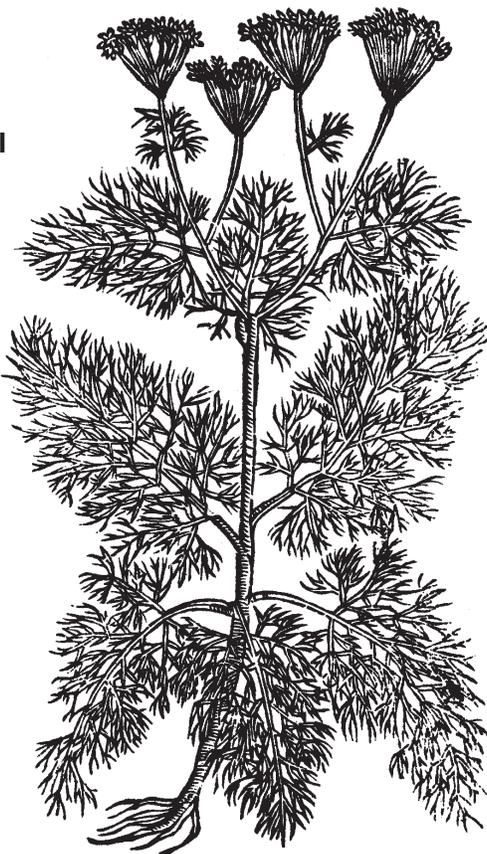
Preferably, seeds should be sown directly to the garden but with short seasons, sow seeds in pots and transplant outdoors in spring into well-drained, fertile soils in full sun. Plants grown for their foliage will tolerate partial shade. Crowding or low soil moisture encourages bolting.

Gather fresh young leaves as you would parsley. Harvest the seeds when the fruit are ripe and partially dried.



Chives

Dill



Dill

Anethum graveolens

Native to the Mediterranean and southern Russia, this plant derives its common name from the Norse “dilla,” which means “to lull.” It was once used to induce sleep. In early America dill and fennel seed were called “meetin’ seed” and were used to calm children during Sunday church services.

Grow this annual by planting seeds in full sun in early spring. The delicate seedlings do not transplant well. Protect the tall plants from strong winds. Harvest the seeds as soon as they begin to shatter but are still mostly green. Snip off the heads and spread them on a tray to dry in the sun for a few days. If you want an especially early crop, plant the seeds in late fall or use transplants in the early spring. Dill will self-seed.

Endive

Cichorium endivia

This is a green that in the curled-leaf form is called endive and in the broad, flat leafed form is called escarole. It adds a unique flavor to salads, and the escarole form is sometimes used as a potherb. Plant in early spring in rich soil and keep it watered well. Blanch by tying together the outermost leaves up over the top of the plant for 1 to 2 weeks. Otherwise, grow it as you would lettuce. Do not confuse this with French or Belgian endive, also called Witloof Chicory, which is an entirely different plant.

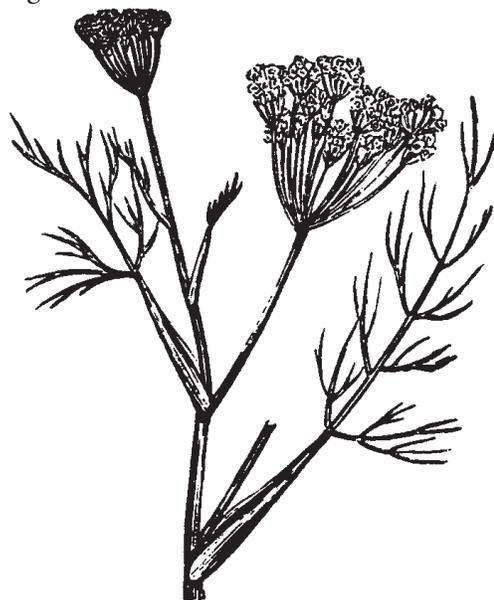
Fennel

Foeniculum vulgare

There are a few kinds of fennel. *Foeniculum vulgare* has feathery foliage and is not easily transplanted. It is an annual, sometimes a biennial, that grows up to four feet tall. The leaves have an anise-like flavor and the blanched stems are eaten like celery. Plant seeds outdoors or in pots early in spring. The seeds have been used to disguise the flavor of unpleasant-tasting medicine, and the oil to perfume soaps and in confectionery.

F. vulgare var. *dulce* is called Florence Fennel or Finocchio and has enlarged leaf bases that are eaten after blanching.

Fennel



Geraniums, Scented

Pelargonium spp.

There are several kinds of scented geraniums used for flavoring foods. Grow these in pots as you would regular geraniums.

Rose Geranium – *Pelargonium graveolens* – The plants are grown commercially for their fragrant oil. The leaves give a rose flavor to desserts and jellies. The leaves can be cut at any time from mature plants and used fresh.

Peppermint Geranium – *Pelargonium tomentosum* – The leaves of this plant are gray-green and velvety and smell like peppermint. They impart their peppermint flavor to jellies and desserts.

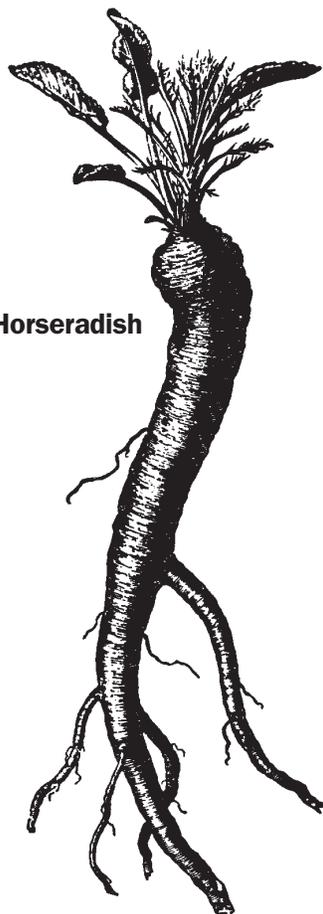
For the real connoisseur, there are also ginger, apple, lime, coconut and nutmeg geraniums.

Horseradish

Armoracia rusticana

This perennial is started by crown division or root cuttings. It needs deep, loose, fertile soil and can survive in the wild for long periods with no care. Harvest in October or early November by removing the tops and digging the plants. Save the roots that are at least as large as a lead pencil to plant back. Store these in sand in a basement or in deep pits outdoors, keeping them moist and cool, but not freezing. Replant them in early spring. Trim off side roots and store them as described above or clean and grate them immediately. Clean by scraping and washing the soil from them. Grate the root directly into white (distilled) vinegar of about 5 percent strength. Bottle and tightly cap and keep refrigerated. Also, the roots may be dried, ground into powder and stored in bottles for later mixing with vinegar. Do all grating outside with good air circulation.

Horseradish



Lemon Balm

Melissa officinalis

This hardy perennial grows throughout Europe and central Asia and has been cultivated in Italy and Greece for over two millennia. It was introduced into England in 1573, probably from France, where it was first mentioned in 1536. The pleasant lemon-scented plant is most commonly used in herbal teas for its soothing, relaxing effect. Ancient Arabs noted its medicinal properties, and it was considered to strengthen memory and abate depression in 16th and 17th century Europe.

Sow seeds directly to the garden in autumn or when soil has warmed in spring. Plants may also be propagated by division or stem cuttings in spring. Plants do well in full or partial sun so long as the soil remains moist. Cut plants as flowering begins and use the fresh leaves to impart a lemon accent to salads, soups, fish and game dinners.

Lovage

Levisticum officinale

Native to the Mediterranean, lovage was formerly used in medicine and in cooking. It was long ago commonly used in England as a medicinal herb but today it is one of the minor herbs.

A large perennial, hardy to zone 3, lovage grows up to four feet tall and produces leaves that are used fresh or dried to flavor soups, vegetables and salads. The bases of lovage stems are blanched and eaten and taste very much like celery. Start plants from seeds and grow them in pots indoors, transplanting to the garden when danger of frost has passed. Set the seedlings about 24 inches apart in full sun or partial shade and in moist, fertile, well-drained soils. Harvest the seeds just before the seedheads shatter. Store dried leaves and stems in closed containers.

Mints

Mentha spp.

Famous Romans were crowned with peppermint sprigs and Ovid considered mint the symbol of hospitality. The Greeks used peppermint to clear the voice and to cure hiccups and, when combined with salt, it was used as a remedy for bites by mad dogs.

Many mint rootstocks can carry pests. **Avoid the introduction of these into your garden by buying inspected and certified pest-free plants from a reputable firm.**

Grow spearmint and peppermint outdoors in full sun or partial shade in a rich, well-drained soil, or in pots indoors. Propagation is usually done by clump division. In fall after a frost, cut the plants to the ground and mulch them for winter. Remove the mulch as spring growth begins.

Mint



Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) is used at home to flavor tea and other beverages, while peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*) is commonly used in medicines and confections.

Both are grown commercially as oil crops and used in confections (candy, chewing gum and flavored toothpicks). No special care is necessary for mint production. Give ample water and keep weeds out. All mints can become invasive.

Nasturtium

Nasturtium spp.

This plant, including leaves, flowers and stems, has a peppery-spicy flavor and can be eaten out of hand or used in salads. The green seed pods are pickled and used in sauces. Grow them in your garden from seeds or transplants and keep them watered and weeded.

Oregano

Origanum vulgare

There are many species of oregano, but this one is the most popular for Italian, Greek, and Mexican cooking. The leaves were commonly used by Swedish peasants to prevent spoilage.

Oregano is a hardy, rhizomatous perennial native to Europe that reaches a height of about 20 inches. The leaves are usually dried and used to enhance strong-flavored dishes that often contain garlic, red wine, tomatoes, chili or onions.

Sow seeds in place in autumn or in spring when soil temperatures have reached 55°F. Plants also can be propagated by division in spring. Soil should be well-drained with neutral to slightly alkaline pH. Because the plant is a perennial we suggest some winter protection, especially for plants on a south or west exposure or near a highly reflective background. Harvest leaves throughout the growing season and use fresh or dry them before use.

Parsley

Petroselinum crispum

This plant is thought to have originated in Sardinia. In Greek mythology it was thought to have sprung from Archemorous, the forerunner of death. Ancient Greeks crowned the winners at the Isthmian games with parsley and warriors fed this herb to their horses before battle.

This biennial plant, not fully hardy in Montana, grows easily in pots indoors or in the garden. Grow it in fertile soil in full sun or partial shade by sowing the seeds outside in early spring, thinning the plants to stand about 3 inches apart. Parsley is used to flavor soup, meats and eggs and as a garnish on salads and other dishes. Oil extracted from the plant is used in medicine. The leaves

are a very good source of Vitamin C and can be used fresh or dried. Cut the leaves as needed and finish harvesting the plant before frost.

Rose Hips

Rosa spp.

The fruit of roses are used for tea and are very high in Vitamin C. In Montana they are gathered from wild roses. Pick rose hips, chill, remove blossom ends, stems and leaves, and wash quickly. Boil 1½ cups of water and add one cup of rose hips immediately; cover pot and let it simmer for 15 minutes. Mash with a fork or potato masher, then let it stand for 24 hours and strain off extract.

Boil and add flavors as desired such as lemon juice or vinegar at about two tablespoons per pint of tea. Pour into sterilized jars and seal. Rose hips can be dried and stored in a canister indefinitely.



Rosemary

Rosemary

Rosmarinus officinalis

Rosemary is a perennial evergreen shrub with small, narrow leaves that are very spicy and valuable as a flavoring and scenting agent. Start with plants or rooted cuttings and grow in pots. The plant is not hardy to much of Montana, so bring indoors in the fall. The plant reaches three feet in height, so prune it back as needed. Use fresh, or strip and dry the leaves and store them in a closed container.

Use fresh or dried leaves sparingly for special accents with cream soups made of leafy greens, poultry, stews and sauces. Mix chopped parsley with rosemary, sage and butter and spread under the skin of roasting chickens and turkeys.

Sage

Salvia officinalis

There are many sages. They were sacred to the Romans and associated with immortality. They were also thought to increase mental capacity. Sage was used as a tea by the Chinese and as a medicine by Native Americans. The one most commonly used in kitchens is *Salvia officinalis* – garden sage. This perennial herb, marginally hardy in parts of our state, grows up to about two feet in height.

Start the plants from seeds, stem cuttings or crown divisions. One or two plants in the corner of the garden or in pots in the house are sufficient for most families. If you are planting them to the garden, set the plants about 2 feet apart in well-drained soil and full sun. You can prune up to six to eight inches of growth from the top each year. Harvest the leaves before the plant blooms. Use fresh, or dry tops or leaves in the shade. If there is dirt or dust on leaves wash them before drying. Pack and store dried leaves in paper bags or other containers. Sage is used to flavor all kinds of meats, stuffing, cottage and cream cheeses. Steep the dried leaves to make tea.

Summer Savory

Satureja hortensis

Pliny gave us the genus for this herb. The word is derived from the word 'satyr', the mythological creature who was half man, half goat, and who was thought to control the taste buds. This is an annual that grows 18 inches tall and has bronzy-green pungent, spicy leaves used to flavor meat, fowl, green salads and egg dishes. Grow it only from fresh seed, since seed viability decreases substantially after the first year. Sow the seeds directly in the garden in full sun and thin them to stand about 10 inches apart. It is sweeter than winter savory (*S. montana*) and easier to grow. You may also grow it indoors and cut the leafy tops when plants are in bud stage. Hang them in an airy, shaded place to dry.

Winter Savory

Satureja montana

This is a perennial hardy to about zone 5, so it needs winter protection in Montana if you choose to grow it outdoors. You can also try growing it indoors. The plant is woody and grows up to two feet tall and is used as summer savory as well as a flavoring for some liqueurs. Pick the leaves any time and dry them for winter use.

Tarragon

Artemisia dracunculus

A perennial anise-scented herb, tarragon produces oil used in flavoring foods and vinegars. Start plants by root or crown divisions and harvest the leaves throughout the growing season. The plant grows to a height of about two feet. Grow it indoors or provide winter protection outdoors.

Thyme

Thymus vulgaris

The genus name for this famous herb may come from the Greek word for “courage” or from the Greek word for “fumigate,” since the leaves were burned to rid houses of insects. A broth of beer and thyme supposedly was drunk to overcome shyness, while the Scots drank thyme tea to gain strength and courage and to prevent nightmares.

This low-growing perennial is only marginally hardy in parts of Montana. Its aromatic leaves are used for seasoning foods and for the medicinal and perfumery properties of their oil. Sow seeds indoors. One or two plants are adequate for most families. Start new plants every three or four years, since old woody plants do not produce an abundance of tender leaves.

Harvest leaves when the plants are in bloom by clipping off five or six inches of the flowering top. To dry, strip off the leaves, and store them in a closed container.

Caraway thyme (*T. herba-barona*) is a native of Corsica and has the fragrance of caraway. Sicily thyme (*T. nitidus*) is used in poultry seasoning. Other thymes include *T. serpyllum* with its many varieties, and *T. thracicus*.



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