

GREEN THUMB

By Becca Newell Whether you're a *Top Chef* contender or, at best, a grilled cheese connoisseur, you're no doubt aware of the difference fresh herbs can make to your dish. And while you might argue the ease of dried seasonings outweighs any benefits of the fresh stuff, we're here to convince you otherwise. Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville helped us develop this handy guide to herbs—along with some bonus material for those already established green thumbs. We created two potted herb gardens: The first, a combination of three basic kitchen herbs, and the second, a more exotic collection of lesser-known plants to up your herb game from novice to pro.

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A GUIDE TO (POTTED) HERBS



WHAT TO PURCHASE

- Three herb plants
- Potting mix (16-qt bag)
- A round planter with a drainage hole (an 8-inch pot or larger is ideal)
- A saucer (to fit the planter)
- A small bag of pebbles or gravel

Place container on saucer. Line bottom of container with a single layer of pebbles or gravel—this helps with drainage, says Charles Kemberling, Annuals and Foliage Buyer at Homestead Gardens. Fill three-quarters of the planter with potting mix. Remove herbs from containers and plant into the mix, sprinkling additional potting mix between plants until the roots are covered.



INDOOR OR OUTDOOR

Where to place your potted herbs is up to you, Kemberling says. Herbs need a lot of bright, direct light, so they're fine either outside or indoors (in a well-lit area) for spring and summer. They can be a little more difficult to grow November through March since daylight and direct sunlight are limited, so it's best to bring planters inside starting mid-fall. Still want herbs through the fall and winter months? Consider investing in a grow lamp. Simply position the lamp over the planter and turn on. An easy way to give plants the light they need to survive and thrive, grow lamps take up a minimal amount of space and are relatively inexpensive.

WATERING & FEEDING

During the spring and summer months, herbs should be watered daily, but frequency can be reduced in the cooler months. Allow the top of the soil to dry out in between watering. Kemberling suggests watering herbs by carrying the planter to the kitchen sink to use the sprayer on the faucet. "Get soil wet until water runs out of the bottom of the planter. Let the water drain out and then return it to its sunny home," Kemberling says. A watering can will work, too, if the planter is too heavy to lift. Like humans, plants also need sustenance, and while most high-quality potting mix contains organic matter and nutrients to nurture herbs, the soil will need replenishing after a month or so. Either liquid or powder houseplant fertilizer works. Be sure to repeat every three to four weeks. Additionally, a slow-release fertilizer, added to the planter at the beginning (when potting the herbs), will do the trick.

HARVESTING

Snipping away at herbs on a regular basis encourages growth. However, for most herbs, don't cut more than one-third of the stem's length or you'll risk stunting new growth. There are some exceptions to this rule, like lavender and chives, in which plants grow faster when all of its leaves are cut.

A HERB GARDEN AT SEA

It can be a challenge to have any sort of garden on a boat—rigging up a few terra-cotta pots isn't exactly ideal—but if you want to have a green thumb at sea (keyword: with ease), here's your answer: boat planters. These portable planters, like the BloemBagz Herb Planter, can be tied, with little effort, to your boat and easily removed whenever you need to take them with you. Made out of 100-percent recycled materials, they're durable, sturdy, and the perfect addition to any floating kitchen.

MUST-HAVE BASIC HERBS

FRENCH THYME This small-leaved herb can be harvested at any time, but it's best to snip sprigs with kitchen shears, right before blooms appear. French Thyme has a sweet, earthy flavor that helps to balance stronger profiles, like garlic or ginger. It works well with a variety of meat and fish dishes, in addition to infusing with olive oil, scrambled eggs, and rice pilaf.

ROSEMARY An intensely fragrant herb with needle-like leaves, Rosemary offers a strong lemon-pine flavor that pairs well with lamb, pork, vegetables, pizza, and pasta. A sprinkling of rosemary mixed into dessert dishes, like shortbread cookies and lemon cake, adds vibrant flavor and depth to sweet treats. It may be harvested at any time using kitchen shears.

BASIL It's best to pick off basil at the stems once the plant is about six-to-eight-inches tall. This quintessential summer herb has a bold flavor that ranges from sweet to spicy depending on the variety (there are more than 150!). Basil is most commonly used in sauces, particularly homemade pesto, sandwiches, soups, and salads—most famously the Insalata Caprese, made with basil, fresh mozzarella, tomatoes, and olive oil, along with a little salt and pepper.

NEXT LEVEL HERBS

LAVENDER Though it's known for its relaxing properties in herbal remedies, this flowering perennial can be used in the kitchen, too. Its sweet, floral essence works well in flavoring ice cream and teas, along with cookies and cakes. And while soaps, candles, and lotions can't be consumed, lavender's aromatic fragrance is a calming addition to these bath and body products. Harvest any time, using kitchen shears, once the stems have flowered.

LEMON BALM Often mistaken by appearance as mint, lemon balm, unsurprisingly, boasts a zesty, lemon scent and a more subtle lemony flavor. Dried, the herb is often used in teas and also works well in broths, particularly if a recipe calls for lemon juice or lemon grass. Fresh, lemon balm pairs nicely with sautéed vegetables, summer salads, and meat and poultry dishes. Leaves can be picked, with fingers, at any time.

CHAMOMILE This flourishing herb, with daisy-like flowers, is well-known for its soothing properties, easing nausea and heartburn, alleviating irritated or dry skin, and, as some studies suggest, calming anxiety. And while it might be best known for its infusion in tea, chamomile's fresh flowers with their crisp, apple-like scent, also make for great lemonade, ice cream, and broth infusions.

