

## HERB GARDENS

After years of saying I wanted one and several half-hearted attempts to make it happen, this summer I've finally got a proper herb garden of my own going in a section of raised bed! I've always grown, or tried to grow, some of my own herbs--whether in a proper bed or in planters and pots on an apartment balcony. While my late grandmother could apparently grow anything at all with seemingly no effort, I used to have a brown thumb and have been known to kill mint. With much effort my thumb is now only slightly tan, and I am able to keep green growing things alive for a little while, at least.

So why this fascination with an herb garden? Twenty years ago you simply couldn't find fresh herbs at your supermarket; so if you didn't want to depend solely upon dried herbs, you had to grow your own. Nowadays, most supermarkets have a reasonable selection of fresh herbs in the produce section. But there's something not only therapeutic but very satisfying in going out to snip off some fresh herbs that I have grown myself to add to a dish I'm cooking. It's about as close as I'll ever get to tilling the soil, but there is a definite primordial pleasure in eating something that you've grown yourself.

I've already got a raised bed with an irrigation system in it, which even gets some sun. So I used some ornamental stone edging to delineate a square about 6 feet by 6 feet. There was already one large rosemary bush towards the rear of the bed—a survivor of an earlier attempt—so I added another rosemary planting next to it. I've got ornamental rosemary out front, which is perfectly edible although it has shorter needles and isn't as sweet as the culinary rosemary in the herb bed. Rosemary and lamb are a classic combination.

Along the right side of the bed I planted oregano and marjoram. The two herbs are very closely related—and if I lose the tags, I can't even tell them apart. I like to put chopped fresh oregano into a tomato-based spaghetti sauce, as well as adding some to a salad dressing of fresh lemon juice and olive oil. Along the left side I planted basil towards the front and mint towards the rear. I prefer spearmint for cooking—it has a sweeter flavor than other types. Try adding a few sprigs to a dish of peas, or tear some leaves up and add them to your salad. Next to the basil and mint is a row of chives, including some garlic chives which are great in Chinese cooking.

I like basic Genovese basil for cooking—although if I can find some Thai basil I'll plant that too, as it has a delicious more pronounced licorice flavor.

Basil is of course the essential ingredient for pesto, although I've never been able to grow enough for pesto. If I'm making pesto, I buy basil at the Farmers Market. But try a tomato salad made with chunks of ripe tomato, about a tablespoon of mayonnaise stirred into the tomatoes, a little salt and pepper, and some shredded or torn basil leaves stirred in as well. In the front of the bed, along the retaining wall, I've planted various types of thyme, which I'm hoping will trail down the front of the wall, along with a pineapple mint with green and white leaves.

In the center is some dill and some fennel. I like to sprinkle chopped fennel over fillets of poached fish, and try slicing a cucumber very thinly, sprinkling it with some chopped dill, and pouring over a dressing made of cider vinegar, a little sugar and a little salad oil. Sprigs of fresh dill also go wonderfully well in a green salad.

Also in the center is some Italian flatleaf parsley and some sage. Fresh sage is wonderful cooked with pork, and if I'm sautéing a boneless and skinless chicken breast, I like to pat some pieces of torn sage leaf on the breast before cooking it. Rounding off the herbs is some tarragon. I love tarragon for its fresh and slightly anise flavor. By the way, use French tarragon in your herb garden rather than Russian tarragon, which is an ornamental with no flavor at all. I put tarragon in all sorts of things, including stirring some chopped tarragon into eggs I'm about to scramble. Now if I can just find some chervil, I'll be all set. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.