

GROWING HERBS IN POTS

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General considerations

Growing herbs in pots can be a wonderfully rewarding experience. It can bring the color, texture, and fragrance of a variety of herbs to parts of your home or workplace where one could not normally grow plants. It can also be frustrating and time consuming. **A pot is a very limited and artificial environment for any plant.** Most houseplant varieties have been bred or selected to tolerate sub-optimal conditions such as low light, low humidity, extremes of heat and cold, moisture and dryness. Herbs have NOT been selected for these characteristics. However, some do well in pots without much help. Others require extra care and ingenuity. A few are really not suited to pots at all because of their very short life span (dill, cilantro), very large size (lovage, anise hyssop, angelica), or environmental requirements (basil in winter). Even these can be grown in pots if you are very resourceful.

Why grow herbs in pots?

1. Portability. Plants can be moved easily to new locations.
2. Hardiness. Grow plants that are not hardy outdoors in winter.
3. Season extension. Extend the season of cold-sensitive plants, such as basil, pineapple sage
4. No garden space available!
5. Decorate areas where there is normally no soil, such as decks, patios, windowsills.
6. Size control (sages, rosemary, & others_
7. Prevention of spreading (e.g., mints and relatives).

Why NOT grow herbs in pots?

1. Production of herbs, as for culinary use, is usually less in pots.
2. Harder to keep plants healthy when grown in pots. Requires more time and knowledge. A potted plant is like a pet. It must be fed, watered, and groomed!

Which herbs to grow?

How do we know which herbs will do well in pots? **Almost any herb can be grown in pots for a few months.** However, if one expects the potted herb to grow for many months or years, and especially during the winter, there are certain characteristics to look for. **As a general rule, the best herbs to grow in pots are the tender perennials (see chart).** These are herbs that would ordinarily survive for many years in nature but are not cold tolerant enough to survive the harsh winters of Wisconsin. They do not have the dormancy requirements of **hardy perennials**, nor do they have the tendency to bloom, set seed, and die, which is the hallmark of the true **annuals** (basil, dill, cilantro, borage, some fennels). The annuals cannot be fooled into living a longer life. Some of the hardy perennials, however, can be coaxed to forego their dormancy, or to accept a lesser dormancy of decreased water and fertilizer during the dead of winter indoors.

Potted herbs outdoors in summer.

Most herbs will do quite well in pots outdoors in summer if **one important concept** is kept in mind. Garden soil acts as a huge reservoir of water, nutrients and as a buffer against temperature extremes for the roots growing in it. Herbs in pots are completely cut off from this reservoir/buffer. Furthermore, the frequent watering of potted plants causes nutrients to be washed out of the soil. These must be replaced. Therefore, please keep these general principles in mind for your potted herbs outdoors in summer:

1. Water frequently, often daily. On very hot, windy days, you may need to water twice.
2. Fertilize your plants during the warmer months of the year! They need many nutrients that they can only get when you feed them. Try a **little** fertilizer every 3-4 weeks. Many herbs have low fertilizer requirements.
3. Soil may be mulched to slow water loss and keep soil cooler.
4. Protect plants from wind and, if possible, from the intense heat of the noon to 2:30 pm period. Nasturtiums are especially intolerant of wind and midday heat. Put these pots where they will get afternoon shade.
5. Do not let plants get potbound. Repot fast growing herbs 1 or 2 times during the summer. Use slightly larger pots than you would indoors in winter.
6. Plant stress may be alleviated somewhat by burying the pots in the ground right up to the top of the pot. Dig up again and bring indoors for the winter.

Getting herbs through the winter.

Light and heat. Bring your potted herbs indoors by Labor Day or soon after, but before the heat comes on in the house. If you are digging plants out of the garden, start 1-2 weeks earlier. Dig and put in a pots. Leave pots outside so your herbs can get used to pot life. After a week or two, wash the plants off with a strong spray of water from the garden hose. This will dislodge dirt and most pests. Let dry in the sun and bring them inside. Most plants requiring full sun will do fine up against a south window, unless it is shaded from outside. Additional light is usually not needed except for basil.

Water and humidity. Learn the specific needs of each herb you are growing. In general, you should water your herbs less frequently from Nov 15 to Feb 15 when light levels are lowest. However, do not allow them to wilt! Put in a sunny or partly sunny location depending on the herb (see chart). Most plants will suffer from the low humidity typical in heated rooms in winter. Therefore, keep the plants in a cool room or humidify the air. DO NOT MIST the plants! This causes such a temporary increase in humidity that it does absolutely no good to the plant and may actually cause fungal infections. Humidity may be increased easily by placing a pie pan of pea gravel under each pot and *almost* covering the stones with water daily. Pot should NOT be sitting in water!

Pests. The other main problem facing herbs indoors in winter is insect pests. Pests inadvertently brought indoors on the plants can experience rapid population increase. Natural enemies are usually not present in the house, so the pests do quite well. Plants should be treated with insecticidal soap as needed for whitefly, aphids, mites, and scale insects. Treat sooner rather than later. Be sure to follow all directions and precautions on the label! Make sure the soap solution touches the live insects, as it has no residual effect once dry. Dipping the foliage in the solution is preferable to spraying it on (better coverage). Use only rain water, melted snow, or distilled water to mix the soap solution. The soap is inactivated by the minerals in hard tap water; salt in "softened" water is harmful to the plants.

Remove all dead leaves that fall onto the soil surface. Prune back any plants that become leggy. Rotate plants frequently so they do not grow one-sided. Begin light fertilizer applications every 2-4 weeks when light levels increase in late winter (about Feb 15). Repotting herbs into slightly larger pots in late winter will help get them growing again. This is especially important with rosemary.

Herb Dish Gardens.

Growing several herbs in one pot or "dish" has become very popular. Such arrangements can be extremely attractive for a few months after potting. However, some of these gardens do not thrive indefinitely due to competition and incompatibility of environmental requirements. Thus a "Scarborough Fair" garden puts parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme together. However, sage gets HUGE, and rosemary prefers to be in a pot by herself or with one other non-competitive plant. When bringing herbs indoors in winter, I like to give each plant its own pot, so that each plant can have its own perfect spot.

Other tips.

1. Choose the right size pot. If the plant has too little soil, it will suffer for lack of nutrients. The soil will be too hot and too dry much of the time. If the pot is too large and the plant has too much soil it will not be able to transpire away the water quickly enough. The roots will be sitting in water-logged soil, which can lead to root rot. In general, an herb will need repotting once or twice a year OR you can trim back roots and the top to keep it in the same size pot.
2. If you're going to go to the trouble of growing herbs in pots, choose varieties that are especially pleasing to you. Yes, you can grow parsley on the windowsill in winter, but you could buy it in the grocery store and put a gorgeous, fragrant lavender or scented geranium there instead! Instead of the same old varieties of sage or thyme, try a variegated or "flavored" one that may be less hardy (remember, tender perennials do better indoors than hardy perennials) but is more interesting to the eye, nose, or taste buds.
3. Creeping varieties may do better in pots than upright ones. Try various creeping sages, thymes, and rosemarys.
4. Rejuvenation: If your planter looks overgrown or scraggly, consider pruning it back hard to stimulate new growth and to give it a more balanced look. Once or twice a year, remove underperforming plants and replace with new favorites.
5. Soil. Best not to use garden soil OR pure "soilless mix". Plants like some soil. It contains many minerals and other nutrients, as well as beneficial organisms. We blend "potting soil" with a soilless mix, such as Jolly Gardener, in a 50/50 blend.

HERBS TO GROW IN POTS

NAME	A,TP,P	S,PSH,Sh	Soil/Watering	Size of Pot	Comments
Aloe vera	TP	Pt Sh	well drained, DRY	crowded OK	Do not overwater or put in hot sun!
Basil	A	Sun	avg soil, moist	large soil volume	requires long day, strong light; not recommended in winter except small leaf varieties. Needs extra nitrogen.
Bay leaf (sweet bay)	TP	Sun	avg to well drained	medium to large	Easy in winter; control scale insects. Crowded roots is OK.
Calendula	HA	Sun, Pt sh	avg soil, moist	medium	long blooming
Chives	P	Pt sh	avg soil, moist	crowded OK	low light requirement
Geranium, scented	TP	Sun	avg soil, moist	medium to large	needs frequent water; excellent indoors. Fragrant.
Kent Beauty oregano	TP	Sun	well drained, DRY	crowded OK	likes sunny, dry conditions. Often blooms in winter.
Lavender	P, TP	Sun	well drained, moist	medium	tender varieties best for indoors
Lemongrass	TP	Sun, Pt sh	avg soil, moist	large	grow as houseplant in winter OR treat as dormant bulb in cool & dark
Lemon Eucalyptus	TP	Sun	Avg soil and moisture	Medium to large	Easy to grow & very fragrant. May drop leaves if soil or air too dry
Lemon verbena	TP	Sun	avg soil, sl dry	medium	Usually goes dormant (deciduous) in winter indoors. And drops leaves. Keep dry & hold back fertilizer
Marjoram	TP	Sun	avg soil, moist	medium	cut back 2 or 3 times in winter
Mints	P, TP	Pt sh	avg soil, moist;	medium	may need extra fertilizer. Corsican mint excellent, but keep very dry.
Nasturtiums	HA	Pt sh	avg, moist	large	beautiful in pots; blooms best in cool weather. Fertilize lightly
Oregano	P, TP	Sun	well drained	crowded OK	Greek (hardy peren) and Italian (tender peren) are best culinary
Parsley	Bienniel	Pt sh	avg, moist	large soil vol.	Curled or Italian. More soil and water = more parsley!
Rosemary	TP	Sun	well drained	large soil vol.	Likes cool, humid, very sunny conditions. Semi-dormant Dec 15-Feb 15. Then fertilize & water more
Sage	P,TP	Sun	avg to dry soil	medium	Many beautiful tender varieties such as purple, golden, tricolor sages; pineapple sage blooms in late fall
Savory, winter	P	Sun	avg to dry soil	crowded OK	Beautiful, low growing evergreen may bloom in winter. Creeping form very nice in pots
Tarragon	P	Sun	avg soil; moist	medium	Usually goes dormant. Treat like rosemary.
Thyme	P, TP	Sun	Avg soil, sl. dry	small to medium crowded OK	Tender varieties do well indoors . Creeping thymes, silver edged, and lemon thymes are excellent
Woodruff	P	Shade	Avg soil; moist	crowded OK	likes, cool, shady conditions.

A, annual; HA, hardy annual; TP, tender perennial; P, perennial
S, Sun; Pt sh, part shade, Sh, Shade.