

RESURRECTING THE HERB GARDEN IN SPRING

Taking Indoors Plants Outdoors. Here are tips for bringing out those pale, scraggly refugees from last fall that you've been nurturing on cold, drafty windowsills and under lights in the basement.

March. Toss out the pots that look truly awful. Trim the survivors back by about half to get rid of the weak, leggy growth. Add a little houseplant fertilizer or, better yet, repot in some fresh soil. Place where they receive maximum sunlight. Start watering more frequently, especially during sunny periods.

April. Check pots for regrowth. Rotate plants.

Early May. **HARDENING OFF.** Pick a time when the weather is mild and calm for several days. Take your perennial and tender perennial herbs (thyme, rosemary, sage, oregano, lavender, etc.) outside to an area protected from cold AND WIND. Within a week, they should be able to withstand some wind and some cooler temps. If the weather gets too wild, you'll have to put them indoors for the duration. Annuals and more tender herbs should not go outside until after the last frost, again, during mild settled weather.

Start Annual Herbs from Seed. There are many herbs you may need only one of, and it makes sense to buy plants rather than start your own. However, if you use a lot of some herbs such as basil, dill, parsley or cilantro, you may wish to start several plants and/or sow them several times in succession. Parsley can be started indoors in early April, dill in late April, and basil and cilantro in early to mid May. If planting outdoors, wait 3-4 weeks longer.

Uncover perennial herbs in the garden. In March or early April, the snow melts, the mud comes and then dries up, and one day, it's suddenly 70 degrees. You brush aside the garden debris and see little green shoots of your herbs! You're itching to clean all that up, cut back old stems, and give those new shoots exposure to the sun. DO NOT DO THIS! GO READ A GARDENING BOOK! Better yet, use that energy to rogue out perennial weeds (see below) that are greening up. Wait a couple more weeks until the next warm period, and then remove SOME of the mulch, trim DEAD stems back from mint, oregano, chives (**removing LIVE wood is called pruning – this comes later**). **YOU CAN KILL YOUR HERBS BY UNCOVERING THEM OR PRUNING THEM TOO EARLY!**

Remove perennial weeds. April. While you're waiting for spring to arrive, get going on those big perennial weeds that are coming up from the roots: dandelions, quack grass, Canada thistle, burdock, garlic mustard (biennial), etc. Do not just pull on the tops. Use a "dandelion digger" or a garden fork and gently dig deep next to each root. Every piece of root you leave in the soil starts a new plant, so try to get it all. Getting rid of these weeds now will save you lots of time later! Be careful that you do not accidentally dig up a prized plant by mistake, especially those late risers like butterfly weed and perennial hibiscus.

Remove perennial herbs that have taken over: lemon balm, garlic chives, mint. Treat these just like perennial weeds, because that's what they have become. These plants will take over, so dig out almost all of it and don't put it in your compost pile! If you permit yourself occasional spot treatment with glyphosate (Round-up), these weeds may be your first target – along with thistles and quack! Wait until they are greened up before spraying.

Look for surviving biennials: parsley, kale, mustards. These plants usually survive our harsh winters, bloom in spring and then die. You can enjoy these tasty greens for a few weeks in spring. You might find some onions you forgot to pull last year, and you can eat the greens of those, too.

Enjoy chives, lovage, and other **early risers.** Make savory spring soups and salads.

Prune back perennial herbs in the garden. Here again, it's easy to kill your plants by doing this too early. Wait until herbs start to grow before cutting back old (live) stems. Lavender, santolina (lavender cotton), winter savory, hyssop, sage, and upright thyme green up first at the tips of the stems. WAIT. Do not prune these plants until you see lots of nice new growth at the BASE of the plant (usually 2-4 weeks later). For most perennial herbs, I like to prune out the most scraggly stems, shape it like a shrub, and remove dead tips.

Hardy English Lavenders (Hidcote, Munstead, Mini Blue, Jean Davis, Phenomenal, etc). Without pruning, these plants rarely fill in nicely with new growth, leaving green at the top and bottom, but ugly “dead” wood in between. Once I have nice new growth at the bottom (early to late May, depending on the season), I cut back each stem hard to the bottom growth. They bush out beautifully and bloom nicely on the new wood in June/July.

Common Garden Sage. Sage blooms only on old wood, and the flowers are gorgeous. If you prune this back hard in spring, it will not bloom. If you DON'T prune it, you'll have gorgeous flowers on scraggly growth. I recommend waiting until after bloom and then cutting it down to 3-4 inches. You will get beautiful, new re-growth and a healthy plant for harvesting. Alternatively, you can cut down the front half of the plant early, enjoy the flowers on the taller back half while the front half re-grows; then cut the back half down after blooming.

Divide perennial herbs (oregano, creeping thyme, mint, lovage, chives). Division shrinks older plants to a manageable size, rejuvenates them, and gives you plants to share with friends. Division is easily done with a sharp spade once the plants have started to grow, usually in early to mid May. Simply chop straight down into the root mass of well established plants and hack off chunks of root with stems attached. Large pieces may be replanted right away back into the ground. Smaller clumps should be potted up and pampered for a few weeks before planting. Do NOT divide herbs that have a single root, such as upright thyme, sage, lavender, and many others. These may be propagated in summer by “layering”.

Remove annual weeds (all the little plants coming up from seed!) and any perennials that escaped your attention. Continue all summer. Mulch in June when soil is warm and planting is mostly complete. Try to find mulch on your own property, such as pine needles and duff or composted leaves. Buying mulch is an invitation to import jumping worms!

Take advantage of self-seeders: Many herbs drop seeds in fall that survive the winter and germinate in spring . We can salvage some of these seedlings rather than buying new plants. In late May and June, look near last year's “mother plants” for seedlings of summer savory, hyssop, sweet annie, chives, garlic chives, feverfew, anise hyssop, even lavender. Be sure of your identification before you eat these! You can usually tell by rubbing the leaves and comparing the odor. Save a few new plants, but remove the rest or you will have a new weed problem.

Plant perennial herbs. Around the 10th of May is a safe time to start hardening off the perennial herbs you have grown or bought and get them ready for transplanting into that garden you've been cleaning up. (See above “Taking Indoor Plants Outdoors”.) Protect them from WIND and temperatures below 40 degrees for a week. Then they can be transplanted safely and should even tolerate a very light frost.

Plant annual potted herbs. By the last week in May we are usually safely past the last spring frost. Hardened off herb plants, EXCEPT BASIL, can be transplanted outdoors. DO NOT PLANT BASIL OUTSIDE UNTIL NIGHTTIME TEMPERATURES ARE RELIABLY ABOVE 50 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT! (Usually June 5th-10th).