

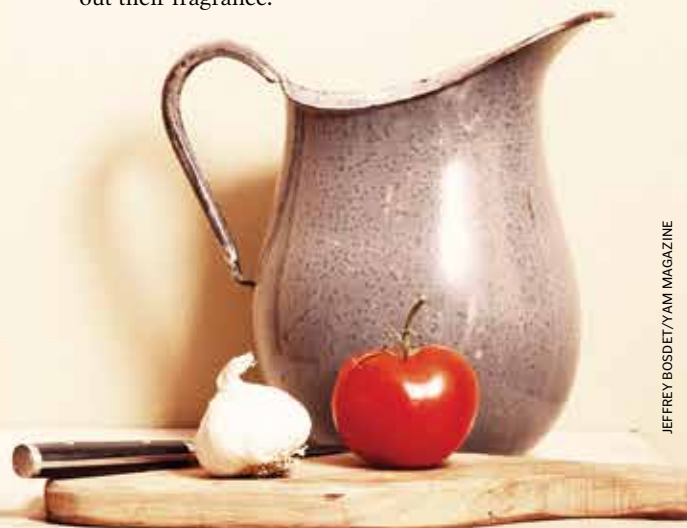
Top 10 Essential herbs

You don't need a really green thumb to grow herbs. With just a little bit of space in your yard, on your patio or balcony — or even in your kitchen — you can grow these essential herbs, known for their health, beauty, and culinary benefits. *By Carolyn Camilleri*



As a gardener, I know how deeply rewarding growing anything can be — the sheer delight in seeing my efforts turn into something living and beautiful, and, in many cases, deliciously edible. But gardening is also a huge time and energy commitment, not to mention there can be hard physical work involved. And, as difficult as it is for me to understand this, some people are bored in the garden.

That's where herbs come in — you get the rewards of gardening, the fun of an outdoor activity, and the pride of having done something yourself, but with minimal time and energy spent. Not only that, herbs are pretty, whether in the ground or in attractive pots, and they smell wonderful, especially when the summer heat brings out their fragrance.



JEFFREY BOSDET/YAM MAGAZINE

Living walls can be used to grow food or for decorative purposes, inside or outside, in a variety of sizes and styles. This custom-built living wall herb garden by Biophilia Design Collective is water tight and will not damage the wall. Watering is done from the top through a drip system.

With very little time and attention, you can be snipping your own herbs to use in salads, as garnishes, and to sprinkle in the bath. And let's agree: it is much more impressive to use your own homegrown herbs than it is to flip open a plastic clamshell box from the fridge.

CREATIVE PLANTINGS

You can grow herbs almost anywhere — outdoors, indoors, on the balcony, or in window boxes — as long as there is sufficient light and water. “Herbs do not require as much sun exposure as other vegetables,” says Bianca Bodley of Biophilia Design Collective. “They can grow in partial sun locations, they fare well in coastal, windy environments, and are also drought-tolerant and require very little water once established.”

You have plenty of options for how you plant herbs. While long-term plants are happiest in the ground, most herbs are fairly compact and have shallow root systems that don't require deep or highly nutritious soil. This means herbs grow nicely in just about any container — old pots and kettles, metal buckets or washtubs, wooden boxes, even metal wagons. You can also set pots inside of larger containers, like baskets. Just be sure your pot has drainage holes, and raise it slightly inside the larger container using pebbles or small pieces of wood to allow a little space between the two. You don't want the herb pot sitting in a puddle of water.

“My favourite way to grow herbs is as a living wall installation on a sunny wall in the kitchen,” says Bodley. “You can have your vertical herb garden as large or small as your herb variety desires are.” An added benefit of living-wall gardens is that they have great drainage because gravity pulls the water through the soil.

The only real difference in care for growing herbs indoors and outdoors is how much you water. “As indoor environments are typically warmer and drier than the outdoors, you should take care to water whenever the soil is dry,” says Bodley.

Although, as Bodley says, most herbs will survive outdoors in the winter in Victoria, you may want the convenience of having culinary herbs indoors during the colder, wet months. If your herbs are in pots, you can move them indoors quite easily.

“My recommendation would be to have some herbs, such as basil, in pots; and others, like lavender and rosemary, in the ground as they are so versatile and attractive in the garden, and get healthier and more prolific the more established they are,” says Bodley.

Of course, there are hundreds of herbs out there to choose from. To make things a little easier, turn the page to Bodley's top 10 picks “from a culinary, aesthetic, and libations perspective.”

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YAM'S TOP 10 HERB FAVOURITES

1. Rosemary > A beautiful evergreen with soft purple flowers; buds in the summer; extremely drought tolerant and fragrant.

Culinary: Can be used as a garnish to flavour stews or to roast vegetables and meat. (In fact, try it out in recipes for pasta, soups, and more.)

Other uses: Rosemary is often infused in oils for antiseptic purposes or for therapeutic uses in bath products.

2. Lavender > Lovely silver-green foliage and purple blooms; multiple varieties; reminiscent of the romantic old-world landscapes of Italy and southern France.

Culinary: Lavender can be used in cooking and baking (try it in shortbread!).

Other uses: Dry the flowers until they crumble and use them for scenting a room, or combine them with Epsom salts for therapeutic baths; make sachets and place them in drawers or beneath pillows.

3. Basil > One of the most tender herbs to grow — keeping basil warm and protected is key; find the warmest and least windy location in your garden or house.

Culinary: An essential addition to households that enjoy cooking Italian, Indian, Thai ... the list goes on: Great tossed fresh in salad, layered in a sandwich, sprinkled on pizza, or chopped into dressings.

Other uses: Infused in oil, basil is thought to have antibacterial properties and can help combat colds and flu.

4. Mint > Plant varieties are plentiful; and all are easy to grow and hard to kill (it can take over a garden and so is best in pots); keep an eye out for mint varieties with chocolate and lemon undertones.

Culinary: Summer means mojitos, which require mint, as do other cocktails. Mint can also be used for garnish or mixed with yogurt for a dip or sauce.

Other uses: Chew it to freshen breath; use fresh leaves (about a tablespoon) to make tea to soothe a tummy ache.

5. Thyme > So much thyme, so little time! Woolly thyme, especially, is a fantastic ground cover, and regular thyme is ideal for cooking and garnish; bees love its scent.

Culinary: Great in soups (especially creamy mushroom soup), sauces, stews, and stuffing.

Other uses: An old home remedy calls for thyme tea to calm a cough and cleanse all the body's organs; try tossing a handful into the bath, which is believed to induce a restful sleep.

6. Sage > Soft velvety leaves; easy to grow and care for; prune hard (almost to the ground) to get fresh sweet leaves each spring.

Culinary: Wrap whole leaves around chicken or pork; roast your meat then chop fine into stews, and add to soups.

Other uses: Steep a spoonful in boiling water for 30 minutes, then strain, cool, and use as a toner for oily skin; strong sage tea (made from dry leaves) used as a gargle can soothe a sore throat.

7. Chives > An easy, perky little plant that will come back every year outdoors; long lasting and sustainable; you only need to snip an inch at a time off the top (like a hair cut).

Culinary: The mild, oniony flavour is delicious cooked with meat or added to salads; crumble the blossoms onto potato salad for a pretty purple garnish.

Other uses: Some people believe eating chives helps with digestion and also aids in ridding the body of bad bacteria.

8. Cilantro > This plant is very easy to grow, indoors and outdoors.

Culinary: Cilantro is a flavourful addition to summer muddlers or cocktails (great with citrus); add it to curry, tapenade, or fresh salsa.

Other uses: Some believe eating cilantro will remove toxic metals from the body.

9. Oregano > A pretty plant and a staple for cooking, fresh and dried; have this herb cut and dried in the kitchen ready to sprinkle.

Culinary: Particularly good in tomato-based sauces and also mixed with rosemary in a Provence-style seasoning for chicken and other meat dishes, scrambled eggs, and salad dressings.

Other uses: Oregano is revered for its antibacterial properties, especially in oil form (you will see oregano oil in any health food store); also considered a strong antioxidant.

10. Dill > Powerful flavour and a giant of an herb, dill requires its own area, as it grows up to six feet tall and its seeds will blow and spread. It should be hard-trimmed (down to six inches) at the end of its blooming.

Culinary: Lovely as a seasoning for lamb or as flavouring in preserves, like pickled carrots, beans, and, of course, small cukes.

Other uses: Made into tea, fresh dill can cure hiccups, and chewing the seeds is reputed to help insomnia. ::



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