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Windowsill Gardening with Herbs

The doldrums of winter and the yearnings for the greenery of spring can be overcome by having an herb garden indoors on your kitchen windowsill!

Types of Herbs for Indoor Gardening:

Herbs grown indoors are selected for their cultural conditions, height, color and fragrance. Those grown in the kitchen are mainly those that are used fresh in cooking. A few herbs that adapt well to indoor gardening include: basil, chives, coriander; sweet marjoram, oregano, parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.

Cultivation and Propagation:

Before beginning your indoor garden you must consider the amount of space available, the sunlight, air, temperature, availability of artificial light, and cultural requirements of each herb. Here are a few simple tips to assure a successful indoor herb garden:

1. Select herbs that are low growing, dwarf varieties, or bush or hanging types. Tall herbs may need staking and may detract from your garden plan. All of the above herbs are suitable for pots. When pinched periodically, marjoram and thyme also grow well in hanging pots.
2. Select a location that will have fresh air or good air circulation, but not draughty. Air will help you grow more vigorous plants as well as decrease the incidence of disease and pests (particularly red spider mites).
3. Select a window with at least five hours of sunlight; herbs grown in windows with less sun can be supplemented with artificial lighting.
4. Group your plants so that humidity ranges from 30 to 50 percent. Placing pots in gravel will also aid in raising humidity as will occasional spraying.
5. Keep the soil uniformly moist, not to allow standing water in saucer or prolonged wilting.
6. Fertilize monthly with a commercial brand of houseplant food; a uniform mix of 5-10-5 is recommended.
7. Prune, pinch and trim plants throughout the growing season; re pot into larger containers in late summer or early fall. Select pots to compliment your decor, graduated sizes of clay pots are not only attractive, but also provide good drainage. Small cedar window boxes also provide good drainage. Pots can be set into the boxes and filled with sphagnum moss or grown directly into a soil mix in the box. Soil requirements are easily met by using equal parts of sterile soil mix, sand, peat moss (or leaf mold), and well-rotted manure. Most of the herbs listed above can be started in this mix indoors by seed anytime during the year.

Thyme is usually propagated by divisions, stem or root cuttings. Sage will also grow from cuttings. Many plants grown in your garden can be brought indoors before the first frost and

forced throughout the cold months. Chives brought in after the frost still provide vigorous healthy greens.

Fresh, Dried or Frozen Herbs:

Most herbs are readily available periodically as fresh plants. Growing your own herbs allows you to experiment with using fresh vs. dried, as well as different types of storage.

Herbs are dried easily in 8-to-10 days when left to lay on screens or a clean cloth in a warm, dry, dark, well-ventilated room. Herbs may be dried more quickly when layered on cookie sheets and left overnight in a warm oven; I have found leaving the oven door ajar with the pilot light on proves adequate. A quick method is fifteen minutes of drying in a 180°F oven. Other herbs, such as chives and parsley, hold their fresh-like quality when frozen. Chives should be blanched in hot water for 50 seconds prior to freezing; all other herbs may be stored in plastic bags or containers directly from the garden.

Remember that dried herbs are more concentrated than fresh or frozen. When using fresh or frozen herbs in a recipe, double the amount required for dried material.

Most herbs are grown mainly for their culinary uses; others for their fragrance or medicinal values. Herbs are very versatile and can be used in the following ways: teas and beverages, potpourri and sachets, salts and butters, jams and jellies, soaps and cosmetics, oils and perfumes, candies, dressings, vinegars, sauces, garnish, mustards, floral arrangements, tonics, salves, gargles, dyes and cleansers.

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