

Gardening

by Patricia VanBruggen

This being the month of July, and my first column on gardening, I'll try to write on gardening and houseplant culture according to the time of year. If you have a particular gardening problem, write the Leeds Lantern, and I'll try to include the answer in the next month's column. We'll include popular houseplant problems and a hint or two to make our gardening jobs a bit easier.

HERBAL HINTS

Tired of paying a mint for a tiny jar of herbs? Try growing and preserving your own. Growing herbs doesn't take much room, and they're easily preserved by drying or freezing. Once you've tasted home grown herbs, you won't want to be without them again.

Most herbs can be started indoors in pots on your windowsill. As soon as danger of frost has passed, transplant them outside or into patio pots. Herbs need rich soil, water and a sunny spot to flourish. Before colder weather hits, pot them up and move them indoors.

Let's look at outdoor herb gardening. Annual herb seeds should be sown in late May or early June in prepared ground as they do not transplant well. Annual herbs for culinary use include: anise, basil, borage, chervil, summer savoury and sweet marjoram.

Perennial herbs should be sown in a seedling bed and transplanted when mature, sometime during summer. Horseradish, one of the most persistent perennial culinary herbs, does not transplant well and should be sown in its permanent location.

Mint, tarragon and thyme are best grown from root divisions or cuttings (not from seed). Fennel is quite often grown as an annual, although it may go dormant for the winter and regrow each year as it is a perennial. Chives, rosemary, winter savory and sage are also perennial.

Biennial plants require two seasons to produce a harvest; one season to establish roots and a second to grow to maturity and then die. Three common biennial culinary herbs are caraway, clary and parsley. Parsley seeds should be

sown in early spring and the plants kept over the winter either indoors or in a protected cold frame.

Here are some general rules for growing herbs indoors:

*Humidity: Herbs thrive where humidity is high but will tolerate a dry environment.

*Light: Give herbs the best light your home can offer. Some need direct light, others can be left further back from the window.

*Temperature: The average home is warm enough for even the tropical herbs, but some require a winter freeze to survive. Tarragon, for example, can be placed outdoors (on the windowsill if necessary) allowing it to get about 15 days of frost. Then bring it in, cut it right back to the soil, and new sprouts will grow from the roots.

*Watering: This is the most important factor. Don't allow the soil to completely dry out; keep it evenly moist.

Harvesting Herbs: Pick herbs when the plant begins to flower. The young, tender green leaves at the tip of the plant are the most flavourful. Cut each sprig 4 to 5" from the tip of the plant. Rinse herbs well and shake off excess water.

Drying Herbs: If you prefer to dry herbs by the bunch (parsley, tarragon) dry them in a perforated paper bag so they won't get dusty. The traditional method is to tie them with a string and hang them upside down in a dry, well-ventilated place. In two weeks, when the leaves feel dry and crumble easily, store the herbs in airtight jars.

Drying may be speeded up by oven drying. Spread the herbs on a baking sheet and bake at 100°F until brittle.

Storing dried herbs: Dried herbs may be stored whole or crushed. Crush herbs with a mortar and pestle or by rubbing them over a coarse screen. Store herbs in airtight containers away from sunlight.

Freezing Herbs: You can freeze herbs in two ways - in springs or in crushed form. Springs should be tied together and washed. They'll need blanching in steam for one minute: Place them in a wire basket or strainer, hold it over a kettle of boiling water, then plunge it into ice water. Shake off excess moisture. Freeze the herbs in plastic bags for up to one year.

To freeze chopped or crushed herbs, measure them into sections of an ice cube tray. Add enough water to cover, and freeze. Label and store the cubes in plastic bags. These herbs will be limp when thawed, so drop the whole cube into a pot of soup or stew for best results.

In August's column, we'll cover the Onion and its cousins: Garlic, Chives and the Leek.



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