

# Growing herbs indoors

GARDENERS WHO LIKE TO COOK, there's nothing like fresh herbs. When the growing season ends though, does it mean you have to resort to grocery store herbs? No sirree! By bringing a few herbs indoors, you can continue to enjoy a year-round, flavorful bounty. Some perennial herbs that make the transition to indoor conditions fairly easily include chives, garlic chives, thyme, mint, winter savory, and lavender. Growing herbs indoors also presents a wonderful opportunity to start new plants from cuttings. They make great gifts, plus you'll have a crop of seedlings ready to transplant in the spring.

Start by selecting the healthiest looking plants to bring indoors. Then dig them up causing as little root damage as possible. Divide the plants if necessary. Before bringing plants inside, double and triple-check each plant for pests by inspecting the stems and leaves. Pot the herbs up in fresh, commercial potting soil and water them well. Don't skimp on soil quality. Herbs in pots need a reasonably rich soil mix with good drainage. To make your own all-purpose potting soil mix one part potting soil, one part sand, and one part peat moss together.

The indoor environment can be quite a shock to plants that are accustomed to cool nights, gentle breezes, rain, and direct sunlight. To help with the transition, you need to reverse the "hardening off" process. Begin by setting the plants out of direct sun for about a week. This gets them used to the lower light conditions they'll experience indoors. After a few days, bring the plants inside for a few hours, then return them outside. Repeat this "in and out" routine for 5 to 7 days, then bring them indoors for good. Once inside, isolate your herbs (and that means quarantined!) for a couple of weeks before introducing them to the rest of your houseplants. There's nothing worse than causing an infestation caused by overlooking a bug or two.

Herbs need at least 6 hours of direct sunlight each day. (Exceptions are parsley, rosemary, thyme, and mint, which can tolerate partial shade). You may want to supplement with fluorescent lighting. A simple, inexpensive shop-light arrangement works just fine. Hang the lights about 6 inches above the plants and give them 14 to 16 hours of light each day. Turn the plants, especially if they're on the windowsill, so they enjoy even lighting conditions. Mist plants occasionally, provide good air circulation, and don't crowd the pots together. Herbs are extremely sensitive to dry, stagnant air. Stale air sets up the perfect conditions for pests and fungal diseases.

Fertilizing indoor herbs is a little bit of a balancing act. On one hand you want your herbs to be healthy and productive, but not so leggy that they lose their flavor and scent. Feed them monthly with an organic plant food. When it comes to watering, herbs can be a little finicky. As a general rule, water most herbs thoroughly when the soil surface starts drying out. Here are some other helpful guidelines:

- ☞ Use room temperature – not shocking cold – water.
- ☞ Let marjoram, oregano, sage, bay, and thyme dry out between waterings.
- ☞ Don't let rosemary completely dry out. It could mean the end.
- ☞ Lemon balm, mint, and scented geraniums enjoy moister conditions.

Herbs work hard as houseplants. They add a certain charm to the indoor environment, giving you flavor, fragrance, and sometimes flowers. With a little extra space, you'll never have to be without fresh herbs again.