

## ITALIAN HERBS

ITALY IS SAID TO HAVE SOME OF THE BEST CUISINE IN THE WORLD, and at the heart of that cuisine are their famous herbs. You're probably already familiar with some Italian herbs — basil, fennel, rosemary, oregano, and parsley are all household names in Italy and around the world. These herbs can make excellent companion plants in your vegetable or flower garden or in pots to give your patio a Mediterranean air. Here are some tips on how to grow these herbs successfully.

**BASIL** is an annual warm-season herb that is sensitive to cold weather. It is relatively easy to grow and makes a great addition to your vegetable garden. Growing basil next to your peppers or tomatoes is said to improve their flavour. Basil is also said to repel flies and mosquitoes! Start seeds inside and transplant when a few inches tall. Basil needs full sun and well drained soil, and can also be planted in pots. Basil's most common enemies are the Japanese beetle, slugs and snails. Pinch back your basil as it begins to flower or it will lose its flavour. This will also encourage it to grow bushier. The best time to cut basil leaves is in the morning after the dew has dried.

**FENNEL** has a wide range of uses. Fennel seeds are used in Italian sausage or chewed with candy after an Indian meal. Fennel stalks are also edible. Fennel has long been believed to have numerous medicinal benefits, and is often made into herbal teas and tinctures. Fennel is a perennial, but should be divided and re-planted every few years as older plants tend to lose flavour. Propagate from seed and plant in full sun, well-drained soil. Water sparingly. The carrot rust fly is a pest on fennel, but can be avoided by planting in a windy location.

**PARSLEY** is relatively difficult to grow because its seeds actually contain a chemical that prevents germination. To overcome this, soak the seeds for two days, changing the water after one day, then refrigerate them for a day before planting. Because parsley is difficult to transplant, it should be sown directly into the ground in full sun or partial shade, or into large, well-drained pots. Though parsley is technically a perennial, it usually goes to seed in its second year and so is grown as an annual. In a vegetable garden, plant near asparagus, corn, peppers and tomatoes. Nematodes are common pests where parsley is grown. If you do have a nematode problem, try introducing ladybugs and predatory nematodes into your garden.

**OREGANO** can be started from seed, but the easiest way is to get a cutting from an existing plant. Choose a plant with strong flavour to guarantee the quality of your own crop. Oregano is decorative as well as delicious, sprouting little purple flowers at maturity. Unlike basil, oregano should be allowed to flower, as this is when its flavour of the leaves is strongest. Oregano prefers full sun and matures best in hot weather. Oregano is a perennial and can spread very rapidly, something you may want to consider when deciding whether to plant in pots or in the garden.

**ROSEMARY** is a tough evergreen that can grow into a large shrub under the right conditions. Although it is a perennial and does well in many climates, rosemary is sensitive to frost so is treated as an annual in our region. However it can be wintered over indoors and taken back outside for the summer. Rosemary does well in the ground or in pots and grows pretty little blue flowers which, can be used in salads or as a garnish. Rosemary also makes an excellent hedge and is great for attracting bees.