

Rosemary as a house plant

IF YOU BRING ONLY ONE HERB INDOORS FOR THE WINTER, it should be the rosemary, or, as Brad would say, *Rosmarinus officinalis*. The basil, geraniums, and so on can be restarted in the spring from seed or cuttings, or bought in pots. The thymes, sages, lavenders, and mints, will survive outdoors in most winters. But rosemary, the piny and invigorating tender perennial shrub, is prized in its home Mediterranean climes, and will not survive a Canadian winter (although attempts are underway to develop a winter-hardy strain). It must be brought indoors.

Rosemary is the perfect herb for wintering indoors. First, its Christmas associations are timely. It is said that the colour of the rosemary blossoms turned from white to blue, because the Virgin Mary hung her cloak on rosemary bushes to dry in her flight from Herod's soldiers. Its appearance and fragrance are Christmas-tree like. With the addition of a red ribbon and perhaps a few small gold ornaments, the upright rosemary really does look like a Christmas tree. Snip finely about a teaspoonful of its fresh leaves and add to a recipe for shortbread, and prepare to be surprised at the distinctive blending of aromatic and sweet flavours.

Rosemary is also wonderful as a house plant because it doesn't readily shed its leaves (although be prepared for some leaf drop as the plant acclimatizes itself to the indoors). It requires little care other than good light, regular watering and perhaps occasional misting of its leaves, to compensate for the dry indoor air. When cutting rosemary for use in cooking, it is better to cut a sprig two or three inches long instead of just pulling off some leaves. If you do this, the plant will reward you with improved bushiness and new growth. The blooms of the rosemary are a covering of tiny blue, pink, or white flowers. Best of all, pests don't care much for rosemary — probably its protective, resinous, oils are off-putting to most insects.

Crafting with rosemary is an aromatic pleasure. Depending upon whether you are bringing one plant or ten into the house, you can tie sprigs of rosemary onto your holiday packages, arranged as a small wreath around a candle base, or sewn into sachets for use as bath-bags. A craft that has been practised since Elizabethan times is that of gilding rosemary sprigs for use in Christmas decorations. Try spraying a sprig with gold paint...it might shrivel a little, but should probably last well through the holidays.

So pot up a rosemary from your garden: water well before digging, choose a pot of sufficient size to accommodate the roots, and don't allow it to dry out for the first few days. Because rosemary, although classified as a tender perennial, can withstand some freezing temperatures, there is no great rush to dig them from your garden in the fall. You can usually leave your rosemaries until after all the other garden clean-up is done — but don't wait too long! And in the spring, you can return your rosemary to its spot in the herb garden, already a good-sized plant, not a little seedling or rooted cutting.