

Summer Herbs

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Based on the number of inquiries we are getting on the Gardening South Texas radio show many of the individuals stuck at home because of the Covid-19 pandemic are growing herbs for the first time. It is appropriate because they are easy to grow and can have a large impact on your cooking with a minimal amount of space for the plants. Grow herbs in raised beds or containers. Here are some insights that relate to some of the questions that the new gardeners have on herb growing.

There are basically cool weather herbs and summer herbs.

The most popular summer herb is basil. The plant is attractive, and it is available in many flavors. Sweet basil is the most popular selection, but lemon basil, Italian basil, Thai basil, purple basil, and other variations are available. All the many basil varieties have unique taste, fragrances, and appearance. Most retail nurseries offer 4 or 5 selections of transplants and several seed varieties.

Cooks tell me that it is now just as common to use basil leaves for flavoring down-home hot dishes and exotic ethnic dishes as it is for the usual tomato dishes and Italian food. A collection of basil plants in 1-3-gallon containers in full sun on the patio are attractive and practical.

An issue with basil seems to be its inclination to go to seed if you do not keep harvesting the leaves and keep it well watered and actively growing. The good news is that the seed quickly germinates to produce new plants. As we move into the autumn basil is cold injured when temperatures fall to 40 degrees, so it will probably only be practical to try and keep it producing until Thanksgiving unless you have a heated greenhouse. The summer and fall produced basil seed attracts cardinals, lesser goldfinches and other seed eating birds to your patio garden.

In San Antonio parsley is a winter herb. It prospers in the cool weather and declines in mid-summer with the heat. The parsley in gardens I am familiar with still looks good if it is in morning sun, but I expect it will decline in July. There are two basic types of parsley, curly and Italian. The curly is darker green and more lush. Italian parsley is more upright. It grows faster but is less showy. Parsley is used mostly as a garnish, but it has considerable nutrient value. Parsley responds well to fertilization with Osmocote or soluble products in a container or slow-release lawn fertilizer in the garden. It is also more likely than most herbs to be infested with aphids, slugs, snails, and other pests. In most San Antonio landscapes expect the black swallowtail to also find your parsley and hatch some hungry caterpillars to feed on the foliage. The same butterflies will lay eggs on fennel and dill as well.

Basil is a summer herb; parsley is a cool weather herb and rosemary is a year-round herb. It is an evergreen plant that in my experience is at least as popular as an ornamental plant as an herb. Grow it in a container or full sun garden space to enjoy its drought tolerant evergreen foliage and blooms in addition to the potent fragrance and flavoring from its foliage and stems. A little rosemary goes a long way in food production. Cooks use it for lamb and chicken dishes plus breads, stir fry, and paired with garlic. More and more it is used as a garnish in addition to a flavoring within the dish.

If you make your own salsa or cook Mexican dishes and have an herb garden, you probably grow cilantro. Cilantro is a cool weather herb that resembles parsley. It can be grown from transplants but does better by seed. The leaves are chopped or cut into pieces to provide the distinctive fragrance and taste. Cilantro is on its last legs in San Antonio gardens from the heat. Plant it with collected or purchased seed next September.

Mint is usually a popular herb for the new herb garden. Everyone loves the fragrance and taste of mint foliage in cool drinks and desserts. It does not take long however to realize that mint is one of the most aggressive plants that we can grow in the garden. It spreads fast to cover whatever garden space you allow it. Because of that tendency I recommend that mint be grown in containers so it can be controlled.

There are hundreds of mint variations from which to select. They are usually propagated by collecting and planting one of the numerous runners.

For information on more of the many herbs that we can grow in San Antonio visit plantanswers.com.