

HERB GUIDE

A Quick Look at Growing and Using Your Own Herbs

Herbs

Herbs are a great way to add some flavor to meals served in your cafeteria without adding unnecessary salt. They can be used fresh or dried and often can be stored for use in winter months.

Annuals vs. Perennials

Unless noted, all herbs listed in this guide are annuals. They can easily be planted from seed and work great for school programs. Oregano, chives, and thyme are all perennials and can be started from seed as well but it is probably best to start them from young plants purchased at nurseries. If you choose to plant perennials, it is helpful to dedicate a permanent location for them in the garden.

Prep for Winter Use

Herbs can be dried by cutting bunches, tying, and hanging in a dry place. Once dry, crumble leaves off the stems by hand, a fun activity to involve the kids with! Dry leaves can also be chopped in a food processor to prepare larger quantities in a more time-efficient manner. Some herbs, namely basil and parsley, are best stored frozen. Simply chop fresh leaves in a food processor, add a bit of olive oil to the basil, and press mixture into ice cube trays. Parsley can be stored in the same manner, just add water instead of oil.

Basil

Grow

- Start from seed indoors, planting in cells or milk cartons in early to mid-April.
- When seedlings start to sprout, thin to one plant per container and be sure they get lots of light.
- Transplant out in early June.
- Once in the garden, basil will begin to bloom. Cutting back these blooms throughout the summer will encourage branching and increase production in the fall.
- Fall harvests can be used fresh or dried for continued use in the winter months.



Prepare

Basil is delicate and easily bruised, so it is recommended to either tear the leaves or use them whole. One could blend the leaves with oil (similarly to pesto) and freeze in muffin tins or ice cube trays for an easily accessible portioned amount.

Use

Basil is the backbone to pesto. Adding pesto to Alfredo sauce gives it color and flavor. You could also try making an herbed butter to serve with some fresh bread. Tossing fresh basil leaves into a salad is also tasty, as is combining it with tomato and mozzarella for an interesting twist on grilled cheese. You can stir basil leaves into tomato soup just before serving. It will also compliment many other menu items such as lasagna, egg bake, spaghetti, roasted zucchini, garlic mashed potatoes and glazed carrots.

HERB GUIDE

A Quick Look at Growing and Using Your Own Herbs

Oregano

Grow

- Oregano can be started from seed or plants available at herb nurseries. It is a perennial plant, so after your first year planting it in the garden, it should come back on its own each spring.
- If starting for the first time from seed, plant in flats or containers in March. Transplant out to the garden in late May.
- To start plants from existing gardens, clumps of oregano from previous years can be dug, cut back, and divided during early spring.
- Oregano you intend to store dry is best harvested just prior to flowering, when fistfuls of stems can be cut and dried, then the crisp leaves can be plucked and stored. Fresh oregano can be harvested at any time during the growing season.



Prepare

Oregano leaves can be used whole or chopped.

Use

Oregano is a pungent and slightly peppery herb. You can sauté it with onions, tomato, and garlic and toss with pasta for a tasty dish. You could also top breadsticks or garlic bread with a little before baking them. Oregano is a great herb for boosting flavor of Italian and Latin American dishes like pizza, spaghetti, lasagna, tacos, fajitas, chili, and burritos.

Parsley

Grow

- Parsley seedlings can be slow to start, so it's best to plant seeds early, usually in early February.
- Plant in individual cells or milk cartons, keep moist until germination, and thin to one plant per container.
- Transplant parsley to the garden in mid-May.
- Parsley leaves can be harvested at any time until severe frost damage takes the plants in late fall or early winter.
- Extra parsley you'd like to store is best frozen; chop the leaves in a food processor and pack into ice cube trays with a little water, then freeze.



Prepare

Parsley can be finely chopped. The stems can be used to flavor soups and sauces by letting them steep (similar to thyme) and discarding prior to serving. Parsley can be added to anything acidic like goulash or chili to balance out the acidity and make the dish more pleasing to eat.

Use

Use finely chopped parsley in any dish you would like to add some color and freshness to.

HERB GUIDE

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Chives

Grow

- Chives are perennial and can be started from seed or by dividing existing clumps that come back year after year. You can also obtain plants from a nursery and start those in your school's garden.
- If starting from seed, scatter in a planting flat, cover lightly with planting mix, and keep moist. Seedlings can take awhile to germinate, so it's best to start them in early February. Transplant out in mid-May.
- To prepare clumps from previous years for new growth, dig them up in the spring, pull apart into smaller clumps, and replant.
- It's best to harvest chives during spring or fall, not in summer when they are blooming. After chives bloom, cut them back for regrowth in late summer to ensure a good harvest in the fall.



Prepare

Cut to desired length with knife or scissors.

Use

Chives have a mellow onion flavor, making them delicious in scrambled eggs with cheese. They could also be mixed into a cornbread recipe for a savory twist. Other menu suggestions include: herbed butter, mashed potatoes, orange chicken, roasted zucchini, chicken fajitas, and tacos. Chopped chives add a bit of zing to salads.

Dill

Grow

- Direct-seed dill in early April in patches or rows, gently covering with about $\frac{1}{4}$ in. of soil. Keep thoroughly moist until germination.
- Dill leaves can be cut once plants are big enough.
- If left to send up flower stalks, yellow umbels will produce dill seed. Harvest whole seed heads after flowers have ceased blossoming and begin to dry, then simply rub the seeds off by hand.
- Doing a second planting in early July will ensure you have fresh dill leaves to use in dishes when school starts in the fall.



Prepare

Dill leaf should be coarsely chopped. Dill seed can be used whole (often in breads) or ground.

Use

Dill has a mild anise flavor that wakes up any dish. Try tossing coarsely chopped dill or a bit of ground seed with roasted carrots or zucchini. Or, stir it into potato salad or coleslaw dressed with a mustard vinaigrette. Other menu items you could add dill to include mashed potatoes, sliced cherry tomatoes, cucumber salads, cooked peas, and unbreaded fish.

HERB GUIDE

A Quick Look at Growing and Using Your Own Herbs

Cilantro

Grow

- Direct-seed cilantro in patches or rows and cover with about $\frac{1}{2}$ in. of soil.
- Plant in early April for a summer crop and again in early July for a good fall harvest.
- Cut back leaves periodically for harvest. Leaves from flower stalks can also be harvested, and flowers themselves can be harvested and used as well for obtaining seeds to replant or use as coriander.



Prepare

You can either coarsely chop cilantro leaves and stems or use the leaves whole. To freeze for storage, chop cilantro and add a bit of water before placing in ice cube trays.

Use

Cilantro pairs well with Asian or Latin American foods. Try stirring it into cooked long-grain brown rice and adding some lime. Or mix it into a tomato and fruit salsa. Menu items that pair well with cilantro could be orange chicken, tacos, fajitas, or burritos.

Thyme

Grow

- Since there are many species and varieties of thyme, purchase plants of a good culinary variety of common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) from a nursery and plant in the garden about mid-May.
- Thyme can be harvested fresh any time during the growing season, and any extra harvest can be dried and stored for winter use.
- Thyme is a perennial, and once established in your garden it should survive the winter if a little added protection is given in the form of dried leaves, straw, or other winter mulch.



Prepare

Pull thyme leaves from the sprigs—no need to chop! If you are using thyme in a sauce or soup, an easy way to utilize the herb is to wrap it in cheesecloth or coffee filter and steep. When your soup or sauce is ready to serve you simply remove and discard the cheesecloth.

Use

Thyme has fragrant mint and lemon aromas and can be used in a variety of menu items such as Alfredo sauce, herbed butter, rice, or even vinaigrette for a salad.