

Herbs

By Ashley McNamara

Edible herbs are delightful additions to virtually any mountain garden. They take up very little space, and can therefore be kept in pots on a deck or against a south facing wall, sandwiched in between shrubs or flowers in a garden bed, or tucked into any available corner with decent sunlight and a bit of runoff moisture. Fresh herbs are far superior to their dried alternatives, and nearly anyone can grow at least a few of them, regardless of their "green thumb" aptitude. Most of the commonly used culinary herbs that thrive in temperate climates can be classified in one of three plant families; these are the mint (Lamiaceae), onion (Liliaceae) and carrot (Apiaceae) families. Plants from each of these families contain volatile oils that are pleasing to the human palate and lend delicious flavor to a huge number of dishes. The plants don't produce these chemical compounds with the goal of winding up on our plates, however. They do it to try to ward off hungry insects, especially those that like to eat plants. (Interestingly, many beekeepers swear by growing certain members of the mint family near their hives, since the volatile oils that the bees bring back to the hive seem to help control varroa mites, wax moths and other parasites). Luckily for us humans, these plants are yummy rather than repellant, and make all kinds of food even tastier. Here are some to try:

Lamiaceae:

Rosemary: If you can keep a geranium alive, you can grow rosemary! These plants have very similar needs. They love to be in a sunny spot outdoors in warm weather, tolerate light frosts well, and will live happily in a bright, cool room all winter with no other care than a little water every other week. They rarely need fertilizer and actually seem to do better when they are pot-bound. They do need more water in the summer; every second or third day they should be given a drink. They also like high humidity; this can be accomplished easily by putting them on a pebble tray. Rosemary is native to the Mediterranean and it features prominently in a lot of lamb and chicken dishes. It comes in different varieties, but the primary difference between these is the growth habit and not so much the flavor. You can find creeping varieties, bush-types and even ones that look like small evergreens (which means they can double as little Christmas trees).

Rosemary is difficult to start from seed; it is usually easier to just buy a plant. They can live for years and provide fresh cuttings on an as-needed basis. Look for pairs of nodes (places along the branches where two new stems sprout from the main ones) and take cuttings just above these to promote new growth. You may take cuttings to use in the kitchen any time of year. I have found that rosemary can tolerate temperatures in the upper twenties with no damage, but if it gets much colder than this, they start to die. Bring them indoors, put them in a sunny window and don't forget to water them about every other week. The plants will tell you if they need water. Look for leaves that appear shrunken and skinnier than normal. They will also need water more frequently as spring approaches. Provide a weak non-acidic fertilizer a few times during the spring and summer.

You can, of course, grow rosemary by planting it in the ground outdoors. Just don't expect it to live as long as it would in a container in your house. By all means put it in your "hot spot" (please read elsewhere in the website about figuring out where this is). Rosemary prefers sandy alkaline soil. Plant in the early summer and water it well at first to help it get established. Check that it doesn't dry out during periods when there is little precipitation. Rosemary suffers from few

insect pests and grazing animals don't seem to care much for it either. It rarely survives outdoors through the winter in the mountain West, but if you aren't inclined to bring it indoors, mulch it very well when cold weather sets in and it could possibly survive a mild winter.

Mints (including spearmint and peppermint): Different species of mint are found around the world and have been used in many different forms for centuries. Spearmint, peppermint and most of the other mint species (except *Mentha arvensis*, aka field mint) aren't native to North America, but they do well enough that they are naturalized and even considered invasive in many areas. Mints are such vigorous growers that they can actually take over a garden under favorable conditions (that is, a lot of moisture and rich soil). In most cases in the high arid West, this isn't too much of a problem, but mint typically does quite well as long as it gets enough water and plenty of sunlight. I have both peppermint and spearmint in my garden, and they are some of the most neglected plants in my entire landscape. All I've done for them is this: when choosing a location, select a spot that receives plenty of sunlight for most of the day (it does not have to be in your hot spot) and close to a downspout so they can benefit from additional moisture. Water them well until they are established. If you find that they are getting too rambunctious, either dig up some of the roots and give them away to friends and neighbors or dry them out completely before adding them to the compost. An alternative method for keeping them somewhat contained is to grow them in a deep pot buried up to its rim in the ground, but this method isn't completely foolproof and an occasional runner may find its way out of the container. Most mint species are perennial, even in the mountains, and can live for many years with little care. Mint is a bit slow but not especially difficult to start from seed. If you're impatient, buy started plants or ask your friends to allow you to take divisions from theirs. Various mint cultivars such as apple mint, pineapple mint, and chocolate mint are also available at garden centers. These are less vigorous and hardy, and cross-pollinate with each other readily, producing less potent offspring. I don't recommend bringing mint indoors for the winter as it is usually covered with aphids or whiteflies by the end of February. Instead, in the late summer harvest as many fresh leaves as you think you might want to use over the winter and spread them in a single layer over a piece of plastic food wrap. Begin at one end of the wrap and roll it up tightly, forcing out as much air as you can, all the way to the other end. Store this in a Ziploc freezer bag and take it out anytime you want fresh mint flavor.

Basil: Basil is probably native to India, but quite a few different varieties of basil grace the tables of countries as diverse as Italy and Thailand. Thai and Greek types are bushier and have smaller leaves than the more familiar sweet Italian basil. Basil is more difficult to grow than rosemary or mint, but it tastes so much better fresh than dried that you may well find it worth the effort, especially if you use a lot of it. Basil does germinate from seed fairly readily. Keep the seedlings moist, provide a good light source and don't bring them outdoors until all danger of frost is passed. In any case, mountain gardeners should plan on using basil that's been started indoors rather than direct seeded in the garden, as the growing season simply isn't long enough to do otherwise.

The real trick with growing sweet Italian basil is balancing two of the plants' needs: they dislike confined roots, and they dislike wide temperature fluctuations. One approach is to plant Italian basil in a container that you take outdoors each morning and set in a sunny spot, then carry back into the house each evening. It does best when grown in the largest container you're willing to

carry. You can look at it as daily exercise for your pectoral muscles, but if you have a bad back, or you usually come home late at night, this isn't a good option. If you have a south-facing window in your house that isn't shaded during any part of the day this may work, or you can keep the plants under a grow light. Another approach is to plant it in the ground and put row cover or a dome of clear plastic over it. This usually works only somewhat well. Take care to remove the plastic (if that's what you're using) on hot days, as your plants can easily overheat. Growing Italian basil in a greenhouse or hoop house is an even better option. One other alternative (which has worked the best for me) has been to forget about trying to grow Italian basil and instead stick with Greek or Thai basil. The flavor isn't exactly the same, but both of these can perform reliably well in containers in your hot spot. They don't seem to be as fussy either about having plenty of root space or suffering through cool nights. I have never had much success with Italian basil outdoors, but both Greek and Thai have survived and provided me with enough basil flavor for my own culinary needs.

Basil should be treated as an annual in any case. It is very frost sensitive, so pick leaves as you need them during the growing season. Harvest the entire plant before it gets below freezing at night and save it in the freezer (see under mint how to do this). Even basil that is grown strictly indoors should be harvested whole in the fall as it becomes a magnet for whiteflies and aphids before long. One good thing about basil is that it can tolerate drying out a bit between waterings. If you find it with drooping leaves, water it well and it will probably forgive you. Basil prefers well-drained, fertile soil. Feed it during the spring and early summer for best results. Pinch off any flower heads that form for better leaf production.

Catnip: Although catnip isn't considered a culinary herb by most people, I decided to include it here as it makes a very soothing tea and is ridiculously easy to grow in the mountains. I should point out that catnip is considered a noxious weed in some states, although not in Colorado. Nevertheless I have found that it self-sows readily and I now have it in several places on my property, thanks to using homemade compost. It might be best to keep it in a container on your deck or patio and cut off the flower spikes before they go to seed (it has a pretty pale purple flower). Catnip seeds can either be directly sown into the garden or started indoors. It seems to do better if you wait until after the frost date to move it outdoors, although the foliage is somewhat frost tolerant. It makes a nice accent plant in mixed container gardens. Move it to a spot where its roots will be underground all winter before the ground freezes (take as much of the roots as you can dig up to the new location).

As I mentioned, catnip makes a calming tea for upset stomachs. If you want to harvest some for your kitty, either give them access to the live plants and let them help themselves or cut whole stems and allow to dry thoroughly (apparently the little hairs on the leaves can be irritating to a cat's mouth if the plant is only wilted). It can sometimes winter over indoors, although it too can suffer from attacks from whiteflies and aphids.

Oregano: There are many different species of plants that have an oregano flavor or aroma. Greek oregano is the one most often cultivated for culinary purposes. Oregano is a bit slow to start from seed and doesn't grow very quickly, but it is fairly tolerant of sandy and alkaline soils. It will be more productive if receives regular water and feedings during the spring and summer. It is more likely than rosemary to make it through the winter outdoors in a hot spot. The leaves can be used fresh or dried for winter use. Again I wouldn't recommend trying to winter this one over in your

house.

Lemon balm: This plant makes a nice foliage accent plant in mixed container gardens. The leaves have a delightful lemony flavor and are great in a glass of lemonade or iced tea, or used to garnish a fruit salad. It is fairly easy to start from seed, either indoors or out. Lemon balm doesn't like to dry out, so keep it moist; do provide it with good sunlight. It has never survived outdoors over the winter for me, but in the right location (a hot spot of course), it could surprise you.

Thyme: Another Mediterranean native, thyme is a humble plant that takes up very little space and makes a great rock garden accent. Culinary thyme species (*Thymus vulgaris* and *citriodorus* cultivars) are less winter hardy as well as a bit thirstier than the tough-as-nails wooly and creeping thyme varieties a lot of us are familiar with, yet they can still be perennial in the right location. Plant them in your hot spot, give them some winter mulch and they will likely reward you with thyme to use in your fish and poultry dishes for at least a couple of years. Thyme can also be wintered over indoors in much the same manner as rosemary.

Common thyme can be started from seed indoors or purchased as adult plants. Lemon thyme is harder to start from seed. Be sure that all danger of frost is gone before moving seedlings outdoors. To harvest, cut off the top two inches or so of branches and use them fresh or strip the leaves off and dry them for later. Thyme loves sandy soil and prefers a neutral pH; if you know that your soil is more alkaline than 7.5, an acidic fertilizer can help. If you're growing it in a container, give it full sun and allow it to dry out between waterings.

Sage: (I have no personal experience growing sage. Please insert Trudy's article here).

A quick word of warning: many different species commonly called "sage" are native to the Western U.S. These are *not* the same thing as culinary sage; in fact they aren't even in the same plant family, although they have a sage-like aroma. Don't try to substitute native sage (aka *Artemisia spp.*) for culinary sage (aka *Salvia officinalis*) unless it is your goal to ruin Thanksgiving dinner.

Liliaceae:

Chives: Chives, once established, are among the easiest herb plants to grow for the mountain gardener. Small underground bulbs produce thin hollow leaves throughout the warmer months of the year and purple, globe-shaped flower heads for a few weeks in mid-summer, which means they double as accent plants in flower beds and mixed container gardens. They are a slow to start from seed and will remain tiny during their first growing season; impatient gardeners should buy a started plant. If you do chose to start chives from seed, be advised that they need to be pampered for several months to get a good start in life. Keep them moist but well-drained and feed them lightly but regularly for their first spring and summer. They can do very well in containers. If you decide to transplant them into a garden bed, do so in late summer or early fall to help them get established before winter. They don't have to be in your hot spot, but they do prefer a bit of mulch to help keep them from drying out over the winter.

Chive flowers are edible, but the plants will produce more foliage if you cut off the flower buds

before they have a chance to bloom. Harvest the leaves and freeze them for winter use as you would with mint or basil (see above). Chives can survive for years and even be divided and shared with your gardening friends.

Although garlic chives are a different species (they have greenish-white flowers and a more garlicky flavor), their care is virtually identical to that of chives. In my experience they aren't as long-lived and hardy but might still make it through the winter in a hot spot.

Garlic: Growing garlic is similar to growing daffodils or tulips. You plant the bulbs in your garden and patiently wait for the seasons to change. The primary difference is that the time investment is a bit longer for garlic. It will be over a year before you are able to harvest; however, growing garlic is truly rewarding. Just wait until the aroma of it frying fills your home! Garlic is not only delicious; it is widely believed to have various medicinal and antibacterial properties.

Garlic should be considered a biennial crop. Choose a sunny, well-drained location, preferably near a downspout where you can either direct water towards the plants or divert it away. Sow garlic by dividing a head of it into individual cloves and planting each clove 4 inches apart (pointed end up) and covering them with about three inches of soil, in the spring as soon as the soil can be worked. Mulch them a bit when winter comes, then be patient until the following summer. When you notice that the foliage looks like it is yellowing and drying out, divert any downspout water away from the plants (or stop watering manually). Hang in there for a few more weeks, then harvest once the plants' foliage is completely brown and dry (at my house this is usually around the beginning of July, but it could be different at your place). Carefully pull up the new heads or dig them out, then let them dry for several days in a warm, sunny area before storing them in the dark, like potatoes. Don't forget to save a head or two to plant the next spring! There are numerous different varieties of garlic to choose from; I would recommend buying your starting stock from a local garlic producer.

Onions: Onions offer a quicker return on your investment than garlic. They may be started from seed; but I have found them to be more dependable to start from sets, especially outdoors in the high and arid West, since these are more forgiving of drying out. Plant these directly in your garden in the spring once the ground thaws and the soil can be worked. Plant the sets (pointed end up) one or two inches deep and four inches apart in a location that receives at least a few hours of sun daily, and is near a downspout or drip-line if you can't water manually (drought, especially early in the growing season, will stunt the plants' growth). Thin the plants throughout the growing season by pulling out every other one anytime you want green onions (aka scallions) to use in the kitchen. The bulbs will swell into larger onions as the season progresses. If you can't get them all harvested before the ground freezes, don't despair; with a little mulch, they are likely to survive the winter. However, if you want to harvest the next year them to use in your kitchen, you need to do it before the plants set flower (at my house, this seems to happen around late June). At that point the plants will direct their energy into flowering and the bulbs will shrink. Harvest, dry and store as you would with garlic (see above).

Apiaceae:

Parsley: Sprinkling dried parsley on food is similar to throwing paper confetti on it. That is, it

looks interesting but does nothing to improve the taste. Fresh parsley, on the other hand, is delicious and chock full of anti-oxidant vitamins. The Italian flat-leaved varieties have the best reputation for good flavor.

Of course it is easy to buy started parsley plants, but it's not too hard to start from seed, as long as you remember a couple of tricks. For one, germination rates improve if the seed is soaked in water overnight before being put in the soil. Also, for some reason, parsley doesn't germinate well in the light. Keep your parsley seedling tray in a dark spot, making sure to check on it every other day. As soon as you notice tiny green sprouts coming up, put it under grow lights. Parsley is a little bit slow to get started, so if you want to enjoy it the sooner in the year, start it indoors about six weeks before the last frost. Keep it in a container which you can move to a shady spot during the hottest part of the summer to help delay bolting (it also helps to choose a slow-bolting variety). Pick or cut stems from the base of the plant anytime you want fresh parsley in the kitchen throughout the summer. Keep the plants well-watered and provide them with regular feedings in order to keep them productive. Parsley tolerates frost well, but deep freezes will kill it. It is usually not worth trying to winter over indoors as it turns into an aphid magnet eventually.

Cilantro: I used to think that cilantro was an acquired taste; I recently learned that there is actually a gene that people inherit that causes them to either love or hate the flavor. At any rate, if you love it, you'll want to try growing your own.

Cilantro can be started indoors fairly readily. Again, it helps to soak the seed in water overnight before planting in seedling trays. Cilantro can also be started outdoors. It is more tolerant of spring freezes than most other herbs I've tried to grow, but for best results I would recommend waiting until May and hardening it off well before leaving it outdoors. It appreciates rich soil and regular watering.

The biggest problem I've experienced with growing cilantro is that it is extremely eager to bolt, after which it takes on a bitter flavor. I have had the most success keeping cilantro in an outdoor area that only gets a few hours of morning sun, as I've found it to be very quick to bolt otherwise. If you notice any stems that are especially lacey-looking, cut these off, as these are the ones that turn into inflorescences. If your cilantro does bolt on you though, not all is lost; you can allow the seed heads to form and dry out, then cut them off, put them in a bag upside down and collect the seeds (this is coriander). If the seeds fall off the plants onto soil and get some supplemental watering, either from you or monsoon rains, they may germinate and provide you with a second crop to harvest in the fall.

As for parsley, aphids can be a problem, especially in the spring and early summer. Actually, cilantro is one of the toughest plants to grow organically, because so many creatures find it so edible. Rinsing off insect pests with a mild detergent solution is helpful.

Dill: Dill, in warmer climates, can grow to be three feet tall. Don't expect that kind of growth in mountain areas. Still, dill is easy enough to grow. Start indoors about a month before the last frost. Dill sometimes reacts poorly to being transplanted, so I usually try to start it in peat pots that I can plant in a bigger container later on. In any case, it likes fertile soil, regular waterings and full sun. Cut back the leafy stems when they are several inches tall to encourage more of them. If you want to harvest dill for the seed, allow it to bolt (which it does readily), then cut off the seed heads once they have turned brown and place them upside down in bags, as you would with cilantro.

Luckily dill isn't as appealing to aphids as cilantro or parsley, but the larvae of Swallowtail butterflies can do a number in it. If you find your dill patch crawling with black, white and yellow striped caterpillars, you may have to ask yourself if you would rather have dill or butterflies.

Caraway: This is one herb I don't recommend growing, as it has unfortunately become invasive in Colorado and is currently on the noxious weed list. This doesn't mean you can't procure your own, though; just plan on wild-harvesting it. In doing so, you'll help control the spread of this weed *and* stock your spice cabinet with just what you need to make authentic Irish soda bread. First, learn how to recognize this plant: Caraway is biennial and produces an umbel-shaped inflorescence of tiny white flowers. Its lacy foliage resembles that of a carrot-top.

(Irene, maybe you have a picture of some caraway you could insert here, or a link to the blog-post on caraway).

The leaves can be harvested at any time and will lend a caraway flavor to salads and vegetable dishes. To harvest seeds, cut off the seed heads as they are turning brown and put them in a bag upside down until they fall off the stems on their own (here's a tip: put the bag over the seed head carefully, then close shut before cutting the stem off the plant).

One other plant I'd like to mention is *nasturtium*. It's not a member of any of these three families, but it is so easy to grow and so multi-talented that I wanted to add it to the list of best herbs for mountain gardeners. This is a good first plant for kids to grow since the seeds are roughly the same size and shape as dried peas and are therefore easy for little hands to pick up and stick into some soil. The flowers come in many different shades of yellow, orange and red and are edible, as are the leaves. They have a spicy, turnip-like flavor that some kids may actually relish, as long as they grew it themselves!

Start nasturtiums under grow lights, or wait until early May and start them in a south-facing window. Otherwise, the plants can get gangly before it is warm enough to move them outdoors. Nasturtiums don't transplant too well, so start them in peat pots or in the container you plan for them to live in permanently. The seedlings need to be kept moist, but once nasturtiums become established, they are pretty drought tolerant. They are quite frost sensitive though, so aren't a good choice to grow outdoors in places where it can get below freezing any night of the year. In their native Mexico and Central America, nasturtiums are perennial, but they can get dried out and bug infested if you try to over-winter them indoors, so consider them annuals. They are easy to collect seeds from; look for clusters of up to three pale green scalloped seeds at the ends of stems and collect them when they fall off the plant readily.

The biggest challenge I've dealt with when it comes to nasturtiums are flea beetles. These tiny black insects are around for a few weeks in the early summer and can stunt or sometimes even kill nasturtiums if they attack the plants at the base. If you are willing to use pesticides such as carbaryl or permethrins, these are usually the best means of controlling these silly little pests. Alternatively, planting a "trap crop" like daikon radish nearby or dusting your nasturtiums with diatomaceous earth will help keep flea beetles off of them.