

Easy to grow, handy herbs can perk up food flavor

By: Lois A. Ahrens, RD, LD

Herbs – edible, fragrant leaves of plants - provide flavorful additions to some foods and become essential ingredients in others, such as salsa and pesto. An enjoyable group of plants to grow, herbs require minimal space and care. Culinary or kitchen herbs can grow in their own designated bed as part of a larger vegetable garden, in a perennial flower border, or, if space is limited, in a collection of pots on a deck or window sill. In general, herbs grow best in a sunny location, with moderately rich, well-drained soil.

Visiting a local nursery or lawn and garden center this time of year will provide many choices and options for planting from seed or seedling. Deciding which herbs to plant can be difficult. Start small and make your selections based on what you like to cook and eat. The herbs you want in your garden are the ones you will use in your favorite recipes. Planting from seed may be more economical but will require a longer growing time, usually 4-6 weeks, until harvest. Consider if the herb is an annual or perennial. Herbs such as basil, marjoram, rosemary, and cilantro are annuals which bloom one season and die. Perennial herbs such as sage, oregano, thyme, and chives grow back year after year which may influence your planting locations. Herbs such as tarragon and mint spread rapidly and may be best planted in pots.

Harvest time for herbs is determined by growing conditions. Most herbs have the best flavor and fragrance before flowering. Harvest about one-third of the plant just as the buds appear. Harvesting often will help the plant to branch out and become full. Once established, perennial plants will generally be ready for use from mid -spring through summer. After harvesting, wash the leaves and stems in cool water and dry on clean towels.

Let creativity be your guide when cooking with herbs. Experiment with small amounts to determine what you like. A few simple herbs will bring out the flavor of food and can easily replace all or part of the salt in recipes.

To release more flavor and aroma, finely chop fresh herbs. One tablespoon of fresh, finely chopped herbs can replace one teaspoon of crumbled, dried leaf herbs or one- half teaspoon of dried ground herbs.

In dishes that require a long cooking time, such as soups or stews, add fresh herbs toward the end of cooking. For chilled foods, add them several hours ahead or let set overnight to allow flavors to blend.

Consider trying these popular herbs in cooking and preparing foods.

Basil— in Italian and Thai dishes, pasta, salads and with tomatoes

Chives—in dips, spreads and salads.

Cilantro— in Mexican, Southwestern and Asian food.

Marjoram—in Italian cooking, with green beans and other vegetables.

Mint— in Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian dishes; also goes well with garden carrots, peas and potatoes.

Oregano- in Mexican and Italian cooking; especially good with tomatoes.

Parsley— in vegetables and salads such as tabbouleh.

Rosemary—(quite pungent, use sparingly) to flavor braised foods, poultry and meat.

Thyme—in Mediterranean food, egg dishes and on meats.

Whether you grow your own, or purchase fresh from a farmer’s market, herbs might be just the touch that transforms an ordinary meal into a memorable one.

#####

Lois A. Ahrens RD, LD is a registered dietitian in the Nutrition Center at the UI College of Public Health. The Nutrition Center focuses on research, education and counseling in nutrition and healthful lifestyle change. Contact her at lois-ahrens@uiowa.edu.

May 5, 2010 – Press Citizen, Iowa City, IA