

Arizona Herb Association

Tips For Growing & Preserving Herbs in Arizona

Soil Preparation

In Arizona's low desert areas, growers are not blessed with the rich, organic soil we'd prefer to have. Most gardens will need some organic material, soil sulphur, ammonium phosphate and gypsum. Every year, as a matter of fact, you may need to add organic matter and gypsum. Pay close attention to your garden soil. If you get a soil test, you'll know what the pH and fertility are and can make any necessary adjustments. If the test indicates your soil needs it, add fertilizer during pre-plant soil preparation, when it is easier to amend the soil; you'll also find the results more effective.

Spade the soil deeply, to a depth of 18 inches, to loosen compact soils. Enrich the soil with plenty of compost and well-rotted manure. It greatly helps gardens to spade as much as 6 inches of organic material into the top 12 inches of the planting area. Allow 6 to 8 weeks from tilling in manure until you seed or transplant young plants.

Garden Location

Locate your herb garden where plants will receive morning or midday sun, with less exposure to full afternoon sun. Most herbs can tolerate full sun, but vigor will be increased with some afternoon protection. Because herbs, like most plants, need a solid root system when the weather begins to heat up, our best planting season for many herbs begins in mid-August and runs until the end of March.

We find it best to plant most herb seeds in the fall, unless noted, but you can plant transplants up to late November or early December (if it's a mild winter) and again in the early spring.

Planting Seedlings

It's very important to keep seeds moist until they have sprouted and seedlings are well-established. If you're transplanting small plants, handle them carefully (don't yank them from their pots). Lightly water transplants a couple of hours before planting time to dampen the root ball; you'll find damp soil does a better job of clinging to the roots.

Gently squeeze the pot to loosen the root ball, turn the pot upside-down and encourage the plant to tumble into your hand. If the roots are beginning to circle the bottom of the pot, gently loosen them by pushing your thumbs into the root ball's center and carefully pulling outward. If they are seriously root bound, use a sharp knife and slit the root ball lengthwise in two or three places; this procedure will cause them to branch out.

Water well with a liquid fertilizer or starter solution at half the recommended strength. Make sure the soil is well-firmed around the plant. Check again after the water soaks in and add soil if necessary.

Watering

Once your herb garden is up and growing, you should water the plants on a regular basis and water deeply. Deep watering on a well-spaced schedule will encourage deep, healthy root growth. If you're adding compost once or twice a year, no supplemental fertilizer is necessary; fertilizing may, in fact, be detrimental. Herbs have better aroma and flavor if they are not fertilized too much. If you find fertilizing to be necessary, use a low-nitrogen fertilizer on an infrequent schedule.

Harvesting

Harvest your herbs often. That way, your plants will stay neat looking and compact. Cutting stems on a regular basis will promote branching, vigorous new growth and strong roots and will increase the plant's future productivity and life. However, you shouldn't do any major cutting of perennial plants during the 40-day period before the first expected frost in your area. At the same time, you should begin to cut back on watering. That way, the plants won't produce the lush new growth that is sure to be damaged by the cold and the older parts will be able to harden off in preparation for winter. After danger of frost is past in the spring and when new growth appears at the base of your herb plant, cut all old growth back to the new. When you are cutting your herbs for personal use, remember to cut back no more than 1/3 of the plant at any time. Keep blossoms cut back to keep the oils in the leaves. If you just pinch off the blossoms, the plant will be stimulated to produce more blossoms, so try to cut back to the woody part of the stems. This will promote stem and leaf growth. Don't cut your herbs in the heat of the day.

Preserving

Although most culinary herbs may be harvested at any time during the growing season, it's best to harvest them when their oil is at a maximum and their flavor at its peak. For most leafy herbs, this optimum picking time is when the flower buds are just starting to open. Mints are an exception. Their flavor peaks when in full flower.

The time to harvest herb seeds is when they have changed color-from green to brown, but before they drop. Herb roots are most flavorful in the fall when fully developed, toward the end of the growing season.

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If you are growing the herb for its flowers, then you'll want to wait until the flower is in full bloom before harvesting. If possible, cut herbs on a dry, sunny morning after the dew has dried but before the sun becomes hot. Clip seed heads and flowers just below the blossom, unless a longer stem is desired for use in floral arrangements. Cut leafy herbs halfway down the stem. Be sure to leave sufficient stem for regrowth.

There are several easy and convenient ways to preserve herbs for later use.

Bundling

Bundling is best done with long-stemmed, leafy herbs, such as dill, basil, mints, sage and parsley. Rinse the cut herbs in at least three cool-water rinses to remove dirt, or until you are willing to drink that last rinse water. Shake off excess water. Using rubber bands, tie stem ends together, forming small bundles. Rubber bands will tighten as the plants dry, thus holding the bundles in place. Label bunches for easy identification later when dried.

Hang the bundles upside-down in a warm, well-ventilated area away from direct sunlight. Sunlight will fade the color and dissipate oils. When they are completely dry, undo the bundles and strip the leaves from the stems for storage in sealed jars.

Rack Drying

Rack drying is recommended for short-stemmed herbs and flowers such as thyme, oregano, lavender and scented geraniums. Common window screens may be used or you can construct drying racks by stretching screening or nylon netting over wooden frames and stapling or tacking it to the frames. After rinsing clean, strip leaves from stems for leafy herbs; leave herbs with small leaves whole. Spread herbs on drying racks. Elevate racks off the ground or set the drying racks on a table. Select a warm area with good air circulation, out of direct sunlight. Dry the herbs seven to 10 days, turning them over periodically so the leaves dry completely. They should be crispy, like corn flakes. The faster herbs are dried, the more flavor and color they will retain. Store the herbs in sealed containers for later use.

You can use this same method for drying seed heads and flowers. Separate herb seeds from the chaff after they finish the drying process. Put dried seed heads in a shallow container and blow over it gently while shaking the container. The lighter chaff will blow off, leaving the seeds behind for use. To remove seeds from seed capsules, shake them or roll them between your hands. Once separated from the chaff, seeds must be dried an additional seven to 10 days before storage in sealed containers. In our dry climate, cleaned herbs can also be placed in a paper bag (you may put a few slits in it) in an area with good air circulation. Shake the bag once a day until the herbs are dried.

Dehydrator Drying

Some sources recommend microwave drying for parsley, mint and other herbs with thin leaves. We find the results disappointing, as many of the desirable oils are burned off. Try using a dehydrator instead. After cleaning the herbs, place them in a dehydrator set at a temperature of 90° to 95°F. Higher temperatures will burn the leaves and destroy the oils. The warm, dry air circulating over the herbs will usually dry them in a few hours.

Freezing

Any herb can be preserved by this method. Wash and pat dry. Remove the leaves from the stems and place them in a single layer on a cookie sheet or a flat plate. Freeze the herbs, then place them in a small plastic bag or freezer container (labeled). This allows you to remove a few leaves at a time as needed. Use only for cooking, as the herbs become soft when defrosted. For best flavor, use within six months.

Storage Tips

Herbs keep best when stored in a cool, dark place, such as a cabinet with a door that shuts light out. The herb cabinet should not be near the stovetop. Date herbs, whether you've grown or purchased them, because their flavor will be better if you use them within six months. Close herb containers tightly after each use.

Usage Tips

When cooking, note whether your recipe calls for fresh or dried herbs. A general rule of thumb to follow for conversion: one part dried equals about three parts fresh. Adjust the amount to your personal taste. When using dried herbs, do not allow moisture to collect in the storage jar.

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