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Talkin' about Herbs

Let's begin by asking a simple question. What is an herb? A plant some part of which, roots, stem, leaves, flowers or fruit is used for food, medicine, flavoring or scent. That definition encompasses a lot of plants that we do not normally think of as herbs, such as trees like oaks and maples, shrubs like roses and honeysuckle and perennials like Iris and Cranesbill. We will not be discussing these tonight but we just wanted to let you know that most plants actually fall into the category of herbs and that many of the plants that we grow today and think of as ornamentals were often grown for their medicinal value. Many of these plants still provide pharmaceutical companies with the core ingredients for their products which our ancestors grew and harvested for their own family pharmacopeia.

We would like to discuss fifteen common herbs that you can grow and cook with to enhance your garden, your food and your wellbeing. We'll begin with growing herbs. Generally speaking herbs are easy to grow from seed and can be planted into the garden or grown in containers. Most require a sunny location and well drained soil. We like to start our plants indoors using a light seed starting mix composed of peat moss or coir and a small amount of compost, mix this well place in a pot or flat with drainage and water thoroughly. Make a shallow row with a dibble or pencil and sow seed at the depth and distance indicated on the seed packet label. Mark each row with a Popsicle stick noting the name and date and water lightly with your hose or watering can with a fine nozzle. You can place the tray in a warm spot in your home or cover with a plastic bag to retain moisture and create your own little greenhouse. Remove the bag in the daytime to allow ventilation and remove totally when the seedlings emerge. Give the seedlings light but not direct sun and keep the soil moist but not soggy. As the seedlings grow brush them lightly with your hands to strengthen them. Expose the seedlings to more sunlight gradually and transplant them into individual pots when they fill out, again exposing them to sunlight slowly.

Transplant them to the garden after all chance of frost is past and do so when the weather calls for a few warm but overcast days. Continue to water and be ready to protect your young plants in case of strong winds or heavy rain. When transplanting your herbs into the garden is sure to weed the area thoroughly and keep up with the weeding to give your herbs a good start. You can mulch around the herbs with chopped straw, or bark mulch to keep weeds at bay. Perennial herbs planted into good garden soil will not need much fertilizer other than a top dressing of compost or organic fertilizer once or twice a year. Annual herbs or herbs in containers will need more fertility, and we will discuss this when we get to the individual herbs.

Maintaining herbs or an herb garden will be an ongoing process- watering when needed, fertilizing, weeding and clipping. Since we have discussed the first three, let's talk about clipping or pruning. After a while that little seedling will become an established plant, to keep it growing well, give it a trim occasionally to keep it vigorous and productive, often after an herb flowers it loses some of its vitality, flavor and scent also some plants become woody and overgrown. By cutting off the spent flowers and reducing the height by 1/3 the plant will fill in on the lower portion and regain the strength it lost through producing flowers and seed. As a general rule, it's best to remove the flower buds on all herbs before they open to keep the plants focused on producing leaves and not flowers. Some plants can also be divided at this time to make new plants to spread around the garden or share with a friend. Good candidates include thyme, chives, oregano, tarragon and mint. Make sure the plant has spread out well and has plenty of roots to go with the division, take a shovel and slice thru the plant cleanly, dig up the division and replant

in another garden or container, push the soil back against the roots of the original plant and tamp down the soil. Remember it's best to do this on an overcast day.

To harvest your herbs do so in the early morning after the dew has evaporated and before the sun is too strong, this insures that your herbs will be at their peak oil content thus most flavorful and strongly scented. You can put them in a glass of water till you are ready to use them fresh. If you would like to dry them, remove some of the bottom leaves and tie them together and hang in a warm, dry spot with good air circulation out of the sunlight.

You can also preserve your herbs in oil, vinegar, or sugar or you can freeze them as well. If you'll be freezing, place your well dried herbs in plastic bags or chop washed fresh herbs or whole leaves and put them into ice cube trays with some water then slip the frozen cubes into baggies and store in your freezer. You can make a tincture of your dried herbs preserved in alcohol, leaving for a certain length of time and then straining them into a fresh bottle. Another way to preserve them is to make a simple infusion of herbs into honey. These preserved herbs will bring a little taste of summer to your table in the depths of winter, flavor a cup of tea or decorate a cake or loaf of bread. You will be happy you planted that amazing little seed and nurtured that little seedling on to fruition and look forward to growing more herbs next year.

Now, on to a discussion of fifteen easy to grow, useful herbs.

Anise Hyssop is a short lived perennial herb that often self sows. It is grown from seed and its purple flowers are loved by honey bees. Enjoy the soft chopped slightly anise or licorice flavored leaves in fruit salads or baked goods. A tea flavored with anise hyssop may alleviate a cold, soothe a sore throat due to cough and improve digestion. The leaves have antibacterial properties. It will grow anywhere but thrives in full sun and slightly moist soil

Basil is easily grown from seed and requires more fertility than other herbs to keep it productive and flavorful during the summer months when we need it to use in tomato (the growth of which it enhances) salads and pesto. Grow Basil in full sun and keep pinching it back to encourage branching and keep it from flowering, which reduces its flavor. Preserve it in oil in the form of pesto in jars or in ice cubes.

Chamomile is easily grown from seed and thrives in sandy soil in full sun. The Latin name is derived from the Greek words for earth apple and it does indeed have an apple-like fragrance. Chamomile is most often used to make a tea, which due to its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. It is used to soothe coughs, colds, indigestion, anxiety and to help one get to sleep. It can be used to soothe skin problems, lighten blonde hair and infused in hot water to clear sinuses.

Chives are a spreading perennial, grown from seed (slow to germinate) or division. Use the leaves when you want a light onion flavor, they are up in early spring to liven up omelets, potato or chicken salads. The flowers grow on tough stems not suitable for chopping, but pick the flowers with their stems, wash and dry by shaking and pull them from the stem to sprinkle on your salads to add a slight crunchy, mild onion lovely pale purple color to your creation. Chives are very easy to grow in full or part sun.

Dill is native to Europe and Asia. This annual herb is easily grown from seed but tends to bolt early especially in poor dry soil. Harvest often to delay flowering but if it does go to seed, make pickles! Dill adds flavor to fish, potatoes, omelets, or potato and egg dishes. This cooling herb aids digestion, and was often given to colicky babies. A poultice of the leaves is said to reduce swelling and joint pain. Does best in full sun.

Lavender is one of the most beloved herbs its Latin name is from lavare, to wash. Since ancient times it has been used to scent laundry, bath water and to disguise unpleasant odors. Lavender can be grown from seed (slow to germinate) or cuttings and must have full sun and very well drained soil. Its beautiful purple flowers are wonderfully fragrant and can be used to flavor sweets and ice cream. The flavor is strong so a little goes a long way. Both the flowers and foliage are highly aromatic and used in perfume and beauty products. Lavender is antiseptic and somewhat anti-depressive and can be used in a compress to ease headache and anxiety. A mildly flavored sugar can easily be made by placing a few lavender sprigs in a covered jar of sugar for a few weeks; it is also great dissolved in tea or sprinkled on sugar cookies. Thoroughly dried lavender wands can be tied together and placed in drawers or closets to lightly scent clothing and linens and discourage moths.

Lemon Verbena is a tender shrub from South America. It's deliciously lemon flavored leaves are somewhat coarse so they are either chopped finely or infused into a liquid sugar syrup then used to flavor baked goods, fruit salad or tea. Too much of this herb can sensitize your skin to sunlight. It's a great ingredient in potpourri and the scent lasts and lasts. Take in your plant at the end of summer, it will loose all its leaves but come alive in early spring for another year of delight. It's best grown from cuttings.

Mint is a large family of plants easily grown from seed, cuttings or division and identified by their square stems. Mint spreads rapidly especially in damp soils so keep it on the dry side in sun or part sun or consider growing it in containers unless you want it to take over. Mint has antiseptic and slightly anesthetic qualities, it is used in decongestive preparations and to relieve colds and asthma, it also repels insects. Some forms of mint are not to be used by pregnant women. Use mint to flavor tea, baked goods, taboulli and mojitos.

Oregano, like Mint is another perennial herb that can be grown from seed, cutting or division. Its Latin name means joy of the mountain as it is found in its native range growing in gravelly soils of sunny mountainous areas. It is used to flavor tomato sauce, pizza and vinegars. The beautiful flowers attract bees and can be dried into lovely bouquets. Oregano has antiseptic qualities and can be used to relieve colds, anxiety and digestive disorders and an essential oil of oregano may sooth aches and pains.

Parsley is grown from seed though it is slow to germinate, it is technically a biennial but can be bitter the second year so start with a fresh plant each year or look for seedlings around the base of last years plant. Parsley's fresh flavor brightens almost any dish and is featured as one of the main ingredients in the Middle Eastern dish of taboulli. Parsley is rich in vitamins and its use as a garnish diminishes this herbs excellent flavor opportunities for salads, soups and vegetable dishes. Parsley is an anti-allergen and can be used for many conditions including, kidney stones, urinary infections and arthritis. Give parsley full to part sun, and slightly moist soil with a good dressing of compost.

Rosemary can be grown from seed but is most often grown from cuttings. Though it is not a perennial for us, stories abound of its overwintering in ideal locations in mild winters. Rosemary has a refreshing scent and flavor and is often used in lamb dishes, to flavor potatoes, vinegars, cookies and in potpourri. Rosemary has both antiseptic and antibacterial properties, and is used to relieve colds and bronchial blockage and aches and pains. Grow rosemary in full sun and plan to take in for the winter to insure its survival.

Sage is from the big family of salvias and is easily grown from seed. The Latin name of this perennial means to heal and its medicinal qualities include antiseptic, astringent and antibacterial. Sage is used as a gargle for sore throats, and gum disease and can aide digestion. A compress of the leaves can be used to heal wounds. Grow sage in full sun and well drained soil; use it in potato, cheese and pork dishes and to flavor sausage.

Savory, both winter and summer versions, can be grown from seed; here we'll be discussing summer savory. It is an under-used herb that has a wonderful oregano-like flavor that greatly enhances bean dishes. By the way, when grown near beans savory enhances their growth. We also use savory to flavor tomato sauce and pizza. Grow in full sun and harvest often to prevent flowering. This herb also has antiseptic and antibacterial properties and aids digestion.

French Tarragon is usually a perennial for our zone, which can only be grown from cuttings or divisions. French Tarragon adds a wonderful licorice or anise flavor to meat, chicken, fish, potato and egg dishes. It is the main ingredient in béarnaise sauce and used to flavor vinegar. Tarragon appreciates full sun and moist but well drained soil.

Thyme is usually grown from seed or division and needs full sun and sandy soil to thrive. Thyme has antiseptic, antibacterial and antifungal properties and is made into syrups for cold and coughs and aids digestion. Use Thyme to flavor potatoes, chicken, soups and vegetable dishes.

So we see that herbs have a lot to offer us, they flavor our food and keep us healthy. Keep in mind that herbs can be planted in our ornamental and vegetable gardens where they add more color and texture and provide us with much beauty.

One more reason to get out into our gardens and start digging, Enjoy!