

## Let's Talk About Herbs

To start the conversation, there is that tricky “h”, whether to sound it or not, whether it is ‘a herb’ or ‘an erb”. Totally unimportant- we will continue to pronounce it the way we first heard it. The next puzzle is where the definition begins and ends. Is it just a plant that can be eaten? Or is it any plant with a domestic use? They tell me that Camellias may be eaten but a shrub that large can't be an herb, can it?

Technically, herbs are plants without a woody structure. A conundrum if you remember that rosemary is woody. To further beg the question, today we require herbs to be useful as seasonings, medicine, or dye. And then, some of us just like to look at them.

Historically the herb garden was a designated cultural practice in Greek and Roman times and reached artistic heights during the Renaissance when exquisitely convoluted designs enhanced manor gardens. Even simple homes had kitchen gardens. Currently there is a resurgence of interest in patterned designs for those with the time and space to practice this art. Most of us plant them for use or for the understated charm of their soft colors and varied foliage. They cool the overheated brilliance of modern super blooms and serve as ground cover plants, less expensive than mulch and serving the same purpose of preventing weeds.

Through the centuries and behind monastery walls ‘physic’ gardens served as ERs to their neighborhoods. Continued use of many of these same herbal compounds has validated this tradition. Although there was a mix of myth and folklore in this early pharmacy, generations of use had dictated specific remedies for specific ailments. Some may have done more harm than good and that tradition continues as well in modern drugs.

Throughout history plant usefulness has been as important as its beauty and we continue to plant culinary herbs to enhance the flavor of food. They may not be as healthy as what your vegetable garden produces but they are a fine substitute for unhealthy sugar and fats.

Herbs vary in their cultural requirements. Many have silvery foliage indicating their happiness in hot, sunny, dry spots. They do well in sandy loam where drainage is good. They also come in annual and perennial modes. The most familiar annuals are dill, chervil, fennel (although it can survive our mild winters), summer savory and basil. Everyone grows basil! A lot of it never becomes pesto but decorates the border where its shiny green or deep purple foliage contrasts with its neighbors. Among its dozens of varieties some are mild, some tangy, some lemon, even cinnamon! One, *ocimum basilicum* ‘Minette’ makes a perfect 10-inch hedge. With such an abundance of basil, you could design a knot garden of them alone.

Perennial herbs are a boon to busy gardeners. Cilantro, *coriandrum sativum*, is used as a leafy herb as cilantro or allowed to produce the seeds called coriander, both useful in Mexican, Asian, and Caribbean dishes. Perennials marjoram and oregano have

similar flavors and both enhance Italian recipes or winter soups. Marjoram is sweeter and milder and has a pretty bloom. Chervil, an annual but one that lasts all winter, is considered a medicinal herb which 'dissolves' bruises but whether it is applied like a mustard plaster or drunk as a tea, I do not know. It is very attractive in a garden patch, stays green after drying and has a faint anise flavor.

Other medicinals include the small chaste tree, *Vitex agnuscastus*. The palmate foliage used in tea was a traditional cure for female ailments. If you find the grocery store herbal teas calming, you might find blending your own a fascinating project. Chamomile, *Matricaria recutita*, is easily grown. If you don't want it for tea, it is a charming ground cover that smells good when rubbed—makes you want to go barefooted.

Our native butterfly weed, *Asclepius tuberosa*, is medicinal. You would have guessed that since Asclepius in Greek mythology, the son of Apollo, was both hero and healer. Native to the Americas, it was used in teas and tinctures to treat asthma, bronchitis and other lung disorders, as well as a poultice for bruises and rheumatism. The native bergamot, *Monarda fistulosa*, used by the Indians for bronchial infections, is also a humming bird magnet.

Thyme, too, was a treatment for asthma as well as for high blood pressure. I can assure you, working among these flowering plants is bound to be good for whatever ails you.

Bees love Borage *officinalis*, used as an antidepressant in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Its bright blue flowers are tasty in a salad. Even more relaxing is Valerian. This tall, to five feet, perennial with white, pink, or lavender flowers can be used for tea. But the root, harvested from the two year old plant, is most effective. This natural tranquilizer should be used with great care: do not drink and drive.