



a handful of herbs

Inspiring ideas for gardening, cooking
and decorating your home with herbs



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introduction

Every one of us feels that our own garden is a particular paradise, but the herb garden has the edge on them all. There is nothing quite like the rush of sensual pleasure that comes from simply brushing against a lavender bush, or stepping across a thyme or chamomile path.

These attractions don't end in the garden. Herbs can be brought into the house to be used fresh in cooking, or dried, frozen or otherwise preserved for later use. Some can be transformed into potpourri or used in different ways to perfume and decorate rooms, or to freshen drawers and clothes, while others fragrance baths or become simple, gentle cosmetics and lotions.

Gardeners of the past discovered, probably through trial and error, which plants were safe to use in food and for healing. Down the centuries herbs and other useful plants have come into our lives courtesy of various waves of invaders, travellers and soldiers. Herbs were first appreciated for their medicinal qualities. In Western history, the medicinal use of herbs dates from the first century AD, when the Greek physician Dioscorides set out the healing properties of more than 500 plants in what was one of the first descriptive herbals, his *De Materia Medica*.

In the herb gardens of today it is not uncommon to find the culinary, medicinal and folkloric traditions of the past combined with a modern appreciation of attractive plant forms. Most herb gardens are now enjoyed for the power-packed aromatic leaves of herbs such as rosemary, sage, thyme, lovage and chives, as well as for the simple but enchanting flowers and useful seeds that many herbs offer. It is this continuity of the past in our present homes that makes the bountiful summer harvest of these useful plants so evocative and especially satisfying.

If asked to define a herb, most people would say it is a plant used in cooking, but the true definition of the term is much wider. It includes trees, shrubs, biennials, annuals and herbaceous perennials that have culinary, aromatic, medicinal and cosmetic uses. In addition, many are excellent decorative garden plants. Some herbs are used for their foliage and flowers, others for their seeds or roots, and some for all four attributes.

Barbara Segall

LEFT Basil's aromatic leaves and flowers add interest to many dishes and desserts.



chive and shallot

The flavour of avocado oil is milder than extra virgin olive oil and works really well with the delicate chives and shallot in this dressing. Avocado oil has the most gorgeous deep green luminosity to it, making this a really striking-looking dressing.

1 shallot, very finely chopped
1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives
1 small garlic clove, peeled and crushed
6 tablespoons avocado oil
1 tablespoon lemon juice
a good pinch of caster/superfine sugar
salt and freshly ground black pepper

Makes 125 ml/½ cup

Place all the ingredients in a jar, seal the lid and shake well until the dressing is amalgamated. Adjust seasoning to taste and serve. Serve with a crisp bacon and cos/romaine lettuce salad with garlic croutons.



herbed labne

Labne (labneh or labni) is a thickened yogurt made by straining off the whey and is popular throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, where it is often served as part of a mezze. The straining process increases the fat content, giving labne a more creamy texture. It is often formed into small balls and stored in oil. It is available to buy from larger supermarkets and specialist food stores (you could use thick Greek yogurt in this recipe instead).

125 g/½ cup labne or thick Greek yogurt
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon chopped fresh herbs, such as coriander/cilantro, mint and parsley
2 teaspoons lemon juice
½ teaspoon clear honey
¼ teaspoon smoked paprika
salt and freshly ground black pepper

Makes 200 ml/1 scant cup

Place all the ingredients in a food processor and blend until smooth. Adjust seasoning to taste and serve. Delicious paired with a new potato, chicory, smoked salmon and beetroot/beet salad.



avocado and Tarragon

With its naturally smooth, velvety flesh, avocado is a superb addition to a creamy salad dressing. It works well with lots of herbs but is particularly good with tarragon, and this makes it the perfect dressing for fish- or chicken-based salads – try it as an alternative dressing to a Caesar.

1 small avocado

125 ml/½ cup buttermilk

1 spring onion/scallion, finely chopped

2 tablespoons chopped fresh tarragon

2 tablespoons avocado oil

1½ tablespoons lemon juice

salt and freshly ground black pepper

Makes 300 ml/1¼ cups

Cut the avocado in half and remove the stone. Scoop the flesh into a food processor and add the buttermilk, spring onion/scallion, tarragon, oil, lemon juice and a little salt and pepper and blend until smooth. Thin with milk or water if necessary, adjust seasoning to taste and serve.



greek oregano

The beauty of Greek food is that it contains simple everyday ingredients that are transformed by the sun – big juicy tomatoes and sweet sliced onions topped with brilliant white feta and a scattering of dried rigani, or Greek oregano. In full bloom, the rigani plant reaches almost half a metre (2 feet) in height and has small white flowers. It is cut and dried in long stalks, with the flowers often still attached, and it is universally considered the king of oregano. You can buy packets of rigani in specialist food stores.

6 tablespoons Kalamata olive oil

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

2 teaspoons rigani or dried oregano

salt and freshly ground black pepper

Makes 75 ml/⅓ cup

Place all the ingredients in a screw top jar and shake well until amalgamated. Allow to rest for 30 minutes for the oregano to soften. Before serving, shake well again. Perfect served with a classic Greek salad of tomatoes, onion, green or black olives and feta.