Spice up your life with herbs

Now is the time to sit back with all your catalogs and choose plants that add flavor to your cooking—herbs.

If you do not want a separate herb garden, then plant the herbs of your choice in areas where you have empty space. While doing this, keep in mind the requirement for caring for herbs is full sun and well-drained soils. Herbs make good companion plants that contribute to the health and flavor of other plants as well as repel insects.

Once your herbs are planted, keep cutting them frequently in the first stage of their growth called the leaf stage. Harvesting herbs at the right stage is very important with a few exceptions. Picking your herbs at the leaf stage gives you the opportunity to capture optimal flavors. If you wait until the second stage of growth, the flowering stage, the leaves slow down or stop growing.

Once the leaves slow, the taste changes and they can yellow. The tastes can change to grassy, woody and bitter. Who would want to eat herbs at this point? Flowers do have their purpose though. At the flowering stage, some herbs are used as fragrant garnishes for salads or desserts.

What can herbs do for you besides add flavor to your food? Herbs are a natural food—food that has nutrients, enzymes, proteins, vitamins and minerals which your body uses.

Eat well and you have a better chance of staying well. So why not add herbs to your garden for fragrance and to enhance the flavor of the foods you love and add nutrients to your diet from a fresh food?

What herbs should you add to your garden? The kitchen herbs are the basic essential herbs for cooking. There are eight essential kitchen or culinary herbs: basil, coriander/cilantro, mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, tarragon and thyme. Basil, cilantro and rosemary are all annuals. Mint, oregano, sage, tarragon and thyme are perennials.

Basil is an annual which you can easily reseed in the garden each year. It is a very aromatic herb which can be used as a culinary herb, condiment or spice. The best way to use basil is fresh, or if not fresh, then dried. During the growing season, it is important to keep basil watered on a regular basis. Basil is intolerant of water stress. It is also best to keep cutting basil.

The first main cuts should remove up to half the stem. And keep pruning to keep the basil bushy. If you wish to plant basil in the vegetable garden, it will improve the flavor and growth of tomato plants. Repelling thrips, flies and mosquitoes, basil is also beneficial for peppers, oregano, asparagus and even petunias.

Coriander, aka Chinese parsley, is often mistaken for parsley and easily reseeds itself each year in the garden. With this herb, cilantro refers to the leaves and coriander refers to the seeds of the plant. The leaves are best used fresh, added to the dish before serving. When the leaves are dried or frozen they spoil rapidly. The seeds are used in cooking, as well. As a member of the carrot family, coriander can be used in the vegetable garden to repel aphids, spider mites and potato beetles.

Mint is a perennial herb which can be very aggressive in the garden. Create an underground barrier, or place the mint in an area where it can go wild. Some of the mints are hardy, such as peppermint, which can grow in zone 3. Spearmint, on the other hand, tolerates the heat best in zone 11. Mint can be used in teas, with lamb, and added to fruits such as berries and melons, and even vegetables such as beans, carrots, potatoes and peas.

If you wish to use mint in the vegetable garden, you can use cuttings of the plant around any member of the brassica family, which would be cabbage, cauliflower and kale. Mint deters a number of pests including cabbage moths, ants, rodents, flea beetles, fleas and aphids and improves the health of tomatoes and cabbage. The flowers of mint attract hover flies and predatory wasps.

Oregano is a perennial which can seed itself in your garden. The ideal soil is well-drained and slightly alkaline with full sun exposure. Oregano is a slow grower. It is good to keep the soil free of weeds around the plant to help oregano get established. Like basil, keeping the plants pruned will keep them bushy and full. If you wish to plant oregano amongst your vegetables, it is very versatile. It can be beneficial for most all crops, especially cabbage.

Rosemary is difficult to start from seed. It is best to take cuttings of this every year to keep inside for the winter. Rosemary will not tolerate our cold winter temperatures.

A temperature of 30 degrees Fahrenheit is about the lowest temperature before the plants are damaged. Rosemary can be used to enhance any food. The key words are “any food.” Rosemary is often added to meats, but is equally great with salads and desserts. So add rosemary to lamb, veal, rabbit, poultry, fish, eggs, pickles, fruits, jellies, jams and cookies. If you wish to use rosemary in amongst your vegetable plants, they deter cabbage moths, bean beetles and carrot flies. So place your rosemary next to cabbage, carrots and beans.

Sage is another strongly flavored herb that is a perennial which requires slightly alkaline, well-drained soil and full sun. Every spring, sage needs to be pruned back. Take away half of each stem. This way it will retain a bushy habit.

For its culinary uses, sage can be used in salads and omelets. Since sage is a rather strong flavored herb like rosemary, it’s best to use it lightly if you have no experience with it. To use sage lightly, we need to use the younger leaves, and sometimes you may want to use only one-third of the leaf. For those with experience in using sage, using the older leaves will bring its strongest flavor out in cooking. If you wish to plant it in the vegetable garden, sage deters cabbage moths, flea beetles, beetles and carrot flies. So plant it next to broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and carrots.

Tarragon is a perennial herb with an aromatic smell similar to anise. It is an herb that is difficult to grow from seed. It is best grown from a root division. If tarragon is not divided regularly, the roots can choke themselves out. Besides that, it thrives on neglect. Our climate of hot and dry in the summer is what tarragon prefers.

Tarragon is one of the basic herbs used by the French in their cooking. Tarragon is used with

chicken, fish, lasagna and eggs. The most interesting characteristic of tarragon is its scent and taste. Insects dislike both, so tarragon is used as a companion plant. Tarragon has the ability to enhance both flavor and growth of nearby vegetables in the garden.

Thyme is a perennial herb that can be picked at any time of the year, but as one of the exceptions, the best time is when it is in bloom. It prefers full sun and well-drained soil. It can be easily started from seed, stem cuttings or division. Thyme is used in soups, sauces, poultry stuffing, fish and other meats. Thyme can be dried or frozen without damaging the quality of the herb. Thyme is said to deter cabbage worms, if you choose to use it as a companion with cabbage in the vegetable garden.

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