

# Top 12 Kitchen Herbs

The preferred methods to start these 12 herbs are indicated by the colors of their corresponding titles below and in the plans:

Green = sow herb seeds or use transplants

Blue = sow seeds only

Orange = use transplants only

## BASIL

Seeds or seedlings of basil, a warm-season annual, can be planted at the same time as tomatoes. Pinch back flowering spikes to encourage new leaf production, and make a second planting from direct-sown seeds in early summer. The flavor is best when used fresh.

**Selections:** 'Genovese' is the gold standard for cooking; other varieties feature burgundy leaves, compact growth habits or foliage with frilled edges.

## CHIVES

A mild-flavored perennial allium hardy to Zone 3, chives produce edible pink flowers in spring. Chives can be grown from seed, but it's faster to start with plants. Keep leaves trimmed to prolong production, and divide and replant clumps in early fall. Can self seed too vigorously in cold climates. Preserve chives by freezing them.

**Selections:** Compact 'Grolau' (windowsill chives) is great for containers; 'Grande' features big, broad leaves.

## CILANTRO

A fast-growing annual, cilantro can be planted twice a year, in spring and again in late summer. Cilantro is among the easiest herbs to start from seeds sown directly in the garden, but it suffers badly when transplanted. Plants are hardy to Zone 7. Leaves lose their flavor as the plants grow tall and develop flowers. Leaves are best used fresh. The ripe seeds are the spice known as coriander.

**Selections:** 'Santo' bolts later than other varieties; 'Delfino' has lacy, fernlike leaves.

## DILL

This cool-season annual bears flavorful leaves when young, then quickly produces flowers and seeds. Plant seeds in spring and again in late summer, or allow the spring sowing to shed ripe seeds. Tall varieties grow to 4 feet tall, though there are also dwarf types. Leaves are best used fresh; seeds dry well.

**Selections:** Dwarf 'Fernleaf' is great for containers; 'Vierling' bears beautiful bloom clusters for flower bouquets.

## MARJORAM

A tender perennial usually grown as an annual, marjoram has a low, mounding growth habit. New plants are easy to grow from seed or rooted stem tip cuttings. The flavor of the leaves resembles mild oregano. Marjoram leaves hold their flavor well when dried.

**Selections:** The species is easy to grow from seed or cuttings. Italian oregano is a marjoram-oregano cross with excellent flavor.

## MINT

Mint strains and species vary in flavor, but all are hardy perennials to Zone 5, and sometimes Zone 4. Mint can be started from seed, but vegetatively propagated strains often have superior flavors. Most mints grow to less than 18 inches tall; all are aggressive spreaders best grown in containers. Clip back growing tips monthly to encourage new growth. Very easy to dry.

**Selections:** Peppermints (*Mentha x piperita*) and spearmints (*Mentha spicata*) are best for cooking; pineapple mint (*Mentha suaveolens 'Variegata'*) has beautiful variegated leaves.

## OREGANO

Oreganos vary in size, flavor and growth habit; all are easy to grow from seeds or rooted cuttings. Cold hardy outside to Zone 5, dormant oregano can be potted up and overwintered in an unheated garage even in colder climates. Dried leaves hold their flavor well.

**Selections:** Greek oregano (*Origanum vulgare* spp. *hirtum*) has the best flavor.

## PARSLEY

A biennial hardy to Zones 5 or 6, parsley is often grown as a compact annual. Grow any parsley from direct-sown seed, though seeds are slow sprouters. Young plants can be set out as seedlings if roots are handled very gently. Flavor is best when used fresh.

**Selections:** Curly parsley is a lovely edging plant, but most cooks prefer the flat-leaved version, often called Italian parsley.



## ROSEMARY

A woody perennial often hardy to Zone 7, rosemary can be pruned back, potted up and kept indoors through winter in cold climates. Superior rosemary cultivars are best purchased as plants. Varieties differ in size and flavor, though all produce pungent leaves and sturdy stems that can be used as skewers. Very easy to dry.

**Selections:** 'Arp' and 'Hill Hardy' tolerate more cold than other varieties. Try compact 'Blue Boy' in containers.

## SAGE

This 20-inch tall woody perennial is hardy to Zone 5, but new plants should be started from rooted stem tip cuttings every other year. The species features gray-green leaves; variegated varieties are less cold tolerant and more petite. Very easy to dry.

**Selections:** Compact 'Berggarten' is great for tight spaces; 'White Dalmatian' features silvery leaves, and 'Tricolor' foliage has pink and white stripes.

## TARRAGON

Hardy to Zone 3, French tarragon grows to 24 inches tall with stems that tend to sprawl. If a stem rests on the soil, covering it with soil often coaxes it into developing roots. In midsummer, cut back plants by half to stimulate new growth. A fine herb for flavoring vinegars, and easy to dry.

**Selections:** There is but one true French tarragon, which must be purchased as a plant. Nibble a leaf before you buy — it should have a zingy licorice flavor.

## THYME

Often called English or French thyme, the best species for cooking grows to 12 inches tall and is hardy to Zone 4. Can be grown from seed, seedlings or rooted stem tip cuttings. Cut back blooming branches to increase production of leaves. Very easy to dry.

**Selections:** Upright, green-leaved French or English thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) provide the best flavor; the variegated forms, including golden lemon thyme, are excellent in containers.