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Growing Herbs Indoors Year Round

By Jason Willkomm

If you love fresh spaghetti sauce or pesto, than you've just got to have fresh basil and other herbs all year round! Sure, a nice 1 X 4 window garden getting at least 4 or 5 hours of direct light from a sunny window will give you something to pinch here and there. Gardens with mint, rosemary, bay leaf, savory, oregano, chervil, sand thyme are some of the easiest to grow this way.

But what if you need your basil...and lots of it? Basil and cilantro need just a bit more light, and really prefer 8 hours or more of direct light each day. In addition to this if you want fresh pesto, just a pinch here and there is not going to cut it. Here's what you can do about it.

The goal is a vegetative light cycle (18 hours on), with eight or more direct sun or bright artificial light. Whenever the light levels are low, give them a boost. Two or three fluorescent lights above your plants will greatly increase their growth and yield. You can grow enough basil for a few servings of pesto now and then, and still have enough always at your fingertips.

Or, with a small metal halide light you would have a larger area with better lighting. You could surely produce an abundance of any herbs you choose for your culinary and aromatic delights. Basil would take well to the bright conditions under a metal halide, as it is a Mediterranean, sun loving herb.

It has been said that some herbs grow better, or should be grown in, poor soil. The oils in herbs make them special. Very fast growing herbs often grow plain leaves and stems more quickly than they can produce tasty essential oils. Often you will hear "basil grows better in poor soil" or "your basil will taste better if you don't fertilize". What these people really mean is "don't grow your basil too fast" (sorry to pick on basil).

When growing in a container, it is a little different. The plant still needs some food to grow, and when that food runs out you will need to fertilize. However, as you will see in the next two sections, this is all taken into consideration together with the growth habits of your herbs.

To keep initial growth rates in control, I use a soil mix with just enough nutrients. Mix 2 parts sphagnum peat to 1 part perlite, and than add 20 percent worm castings. Adjust the Ph of any mix using

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sphagnum peat moss by adding 2 teaspoons of hydrated lime for every gallon of soil mix. or You can substitute peat with coconut coir or vermiculite, which do not need Ph adjusting. Finally, I add 1 tablespoon of kelp meal for each gallon of soil to add plant hormones and to give beneficial micro-organisms something to feed on. Use this mix whenever you transplant.

If you feel the top of the soil and it is dry, than you need to water. Another way is to pick up the container and check how heavy it is. Your herbs like their soil to drain fast. You need to have containers with holes in the bottom, and you need to add an inch or so of perlite or gravel to the bottom of each container as you transplant. It is best to water thoroughly, but less often. Water the container until some water comes out the bottom.

When the herbs have been in any container for ten days or more, you need to begin feeding them. In a container, the roots are stuck in a small space and quickly mine it free of any nutrients, especially if you were going easy on the nutrients to begin with. Feed with half strength nutrient such as Maxsea

16-16-16 every two weeks.

If you really want to keep your plants healthy, I also recommend 10 ml/gallon Thrive Alive B1 and Maxicrop liquid seaweed in every drop of water you give to your plants. The B1 is vitamins and root hormones, and the seaweed is trace nutrients and plant growth hormones. This will help with essential oil production. Finally, water basil from around the base...it does not like water on its leaves.

As soon as the herbs have grown enough leaves to be pinched without affecting their growth, you can begin using some of the herbs. This is usually about 4 to 6 weeks, depending on the herbs. Herbs like basil are best when harvested before flowers open. You will get your highest essential oil levels when you harvest at the end of the dark period, assuming you do not leave the lights on 24 hours a day.

Herbs: Growing Your Own

By Andy Wiley

The first thing you need to do when deciding to create your own Herb Garden is to decide on the size of the plot of land you want to use. This will depend on what herbs and how much you want to grow. Unless you are an experienced gardener or a herb fanatic don't make your plot too big at first. Remember, you can always add to it later. You can create a raised bed to grow your herbs in and always add more when you decide you need to grow more. Remember to plan out your planting sequence and keep records of what is planted where as well as marking your planting with plastic nametags.

You need to remember that most herbs usually like well-drained soil so start your bed with a good layer of gravel that will help drainage. Place your soil on top of this but remember to add some compost into this. If you have a free draining soil to start with you should be able to manage without the gravel. Make sure your plot is in full sun as many herbs originate in the Mediterranean region.

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Most herbs can be sown from seed so you can buy these from your local nursery. You can also buy small plants for transplanting but there is nothing more satisfying than doing all the work yourself so try to grow from seed first. If you don't succeed then try small plants later but remember to read the label, as some plants such as coriander do not transplant very well.

Remember that you can also grow many herbs in small tubs or window boxes and can even grow them on your windowsill. Try planting Basil over the winter as long as it is indoors as Basil is a frost tender plant and will die after a single light frost. You can also try starting your seeds off early in the year to plant out as soon as the risk of frost has passed. An early start will give you herbs for longer. If you plant out too early you can always try covering your tender plants with fleece to keep the frosts off. If you live in a frost-free place, get cracking now.

Andy Wiley is a budding gardener, chef and internet writer. Check out his new site at

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