



A Love Affair with Herbs

The ever-expanding herb market provides opportunities for garden centers to stand out. Find out just how you can make a name for yourself with herbs.

By Candy Traven

The market for herbs continues to grow. We've been growing herbs commercially at Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa., for more than 20 years. It's a story I never grow tired of telling. I'm the heart and my husband, Lloyd, is the head of our business. I'm instinctive; he's intellectual. I knew we needed to grow potted herbs, and Lloyd was skeptical, to say the least. Grudgingly, Lloyd agreed to humor me. The first year we grew 5,000 pots; the second 10,000; we now grow more than 100,000 finished pots per year. In addition, we are herb propagators, growing almost 800,000 individual plantlets and shipping herb liners throughout the United States and Canada. My passion for herbs goes far beyond being able to say to Lloyd, "I told you so."

Herb Lore

The best way to sell herbs is to learn about herbal lore and traditional uses. If you share your knowledge and passion for these plants, you'll find it's often contagious. There aren't too many people who can resist the fragrance of lavender, the scent of lemon verbena or the invigorating aroma of peppermint. Don't sell the herb, sell the concept and the allure.

Much of the vast knowledge of herbal use and cultivation was handed down by word of mouth. Herbs have always been used for food and medicine. Many herbs are native to the Middle East — thyme, sage, mint, marjoram, rosemary and hysop among them. The ancient Egyptians imported many of their herbs, spices and aromatic oils from Babylon and India. The ancient Greeks and Romans brought seeds and plants with them as

they conquered most of Europe and parts of Asia. More than 200 different herbs were introduced to Britain by the invading Romans, amongst them fennel, sage, borage, betony, rosemary and thyme. The first settlers brought treasured seeds and roots of favorite herbs to America.

Herb Uses

There are almost as many uses for herbs as there are herb varieties. There are culinary, medicinal, aromatic and ornamental herbs. They can be grown in container gardens, kitchen gardens, beds and formal knot gardens. Foliage colors range from shades of soft gray to dark purple, chartreuse and bronze; some display striking variegation as well. The assortment of texture and plant forms is as diverse as the plants themselves. There are small-leaved thymes, towering lovage and angelica, wispy fennel and dill, cascading oregano and shrubby rosemary. Herbs can be trained into topiary wreaths and standardized trees or left in their natural shapes.

Herbs lend themselves very nicely to mixed containers. The three structural elements — upright, mounding and trailing — are available. Some of my favorite upright rosemary varieties are 'Tuscan Blue' or 'Barbeque' due to their shape and larger leaves. I love using 'African Blue' basil because it has purple and green foliage with lovely lavender flower spikes. Bronze fennel adds a dramatic smoky effect to mixed containers. The colorful gold, purple or



Top: Peace Tree Farm's newest greenhouse lends itself well to herbs. **Bottom:** The three structural elements of mixed containers — upright, mounding and trailing — also apply to herbs. (Photos courtesy of Peace Tree Farm)

Top 10

There are hundreds of herb varieties, but there is not that much space in your garden center, so we'll focus on the top 10 must-haves. Herbs such as catnip, chamomile, dill, hyssop and rue, to name a few, should all be part of an herb collection, but you don't need to have as many of them.

Basil. The number one seller is 'Sweet Genovese', a culinary seed annual often used for pesto. Other superb varieties are 'Siam Queen', 'Magic Michael', 'African Blue' and 'Dwarf Purple'. Basil needs a warm temperature no cooler than 60° F. The soil should be slightly moist, not wet.

Rosemary. *Rosemary officinalis* is a tender shrubby perennial primarily used in cooking, but it has medicinal properties as well. There are many hardy varieties, such as 'Hardy Hill' and 'Arp'. *Rosemary prostrata* 'Haifa' and 'Irene' have trailing growth. Plants have blue flowers during the winter months. Rosemary loves the sun and prefers to be slightly dry between thorough waterings. Do not let it wilt.

Lavender. This is my favorite herb because of the incredible fragrance and versatility. If the leaves are rubbed to release the oils, it has a calming effect. 'Hidcote' and 'Munstead' are most often requested, but they're not necessarily the best. Lavender wants a dry location with lots of sunshine, good drainage and air circulation.

Thyme. Thyme is for happiness and strength and was once a symbol of courage. Plants bloom in many colors and form lovely mats of flowers that are pleasant to walk or lay on. Thyme should be kept trimmed to promote new growth and requires good air circulation. The most popular varieties are English, golden lemon, silver and mother or creeping.

Sage. This handsome fellow emits a masculine smell and has a striking appearance. Sage has leathery foliage in gray, gold, purple or variegated. It is a vigorous grower and does well with rosemary and thyme. If a sage dies suddenly, tell your customer to not replant another one in the same place. Sage is susceptible to Rhizoctonia, a soil-borne disease that gives the appearance of a wilted plant. The new plant in the same spot will suffer the same fate.

Oregano. In spite of the confusion, these plants are easy to grow and edible. I was surprised to learn that it is one of the ingredients in vermouth. If overfed or over-watered oreganos can get out of hand. My favorite culinary varieties are Greek, 'Hot & Spicy' and *Marjoram compacta*. The best plants for decorative foliage are gold and variegated oregano and gold-tipped marjoram.

Tarragon. French tarragon is the only tarragon to have; anything else is a nasty old weed. French tarragon is a culinary perennial propagated by cuttings or root division. If your local vendor sells seed-grown or Russian tarragon, slap them on the wrist and tell them they are very bad! French tarragon is best known for its use in French cooking and tarragon vinegar and is especially useful with poultry.

Parsley. This big seller is a biennial best grown as an annual; it gets bitter when it goes to seed the second year. Parsley likes company and looks great in mass plantings. There are two basic types: curly, which is more ornamental, and Italian or flat, which is more flavorful but not as pretty.

Mint. Peppermint and spearmint are the most popular but are very invasive. Once you have mint, you'll always have mint. Mint is best grown in a pot in partial shade. Mints are useful for herbal teas or to add fragrance to potpourri. Ginger mint and pineapple mint both have interesting color and variegation.

Coriander or Chives. The last recommendation is either coriander, also known as cilantro, or chives. I prefer coriander, but I think that is due to personal preference and geographic location. They are both seed-grown culinary annuals that will reseed in the garden.

tricolor sages are great mounding fillers. Of the many trailing herbs, my favorite is 'Gold Tipped' marjoram, a perennial with small, round, curled, chartreuse leaves. Golden oregano (use the Israeli selection for its vivid color) is another favorite due to its bright color that lights up the garden. The thymes are a wonderful addition to containers, with silver, yellow and shiny green foliage cascading over the edge.

To add a bit of flower power, use edible flowers such as violas, calendulas or nasturtiums. Window boxes, hanging baskets and strawberry jars are just a few suggestions for possible containers. A grouping of assorted-sized pots with a few turned over as risers also make a nice display.

Herbs can also be grown in the garden with other plants. Golden lemon thyme makes a nice edging with its yellow and green variegated leaves, and it emits a wonderful lemon scent as you brush by it. Curly parsley, an edible edging plant that is good for digestion, can also attract butterflies. Vegetatively propagated marjoram and oregano are attractive culinary plants that work well as edges or fillers. These varieties have varying heights and are far superior to the seed-grown cultivars. Lavender, rosemary, germander and santolina all make useful hedging and knot garden plants when kept trimmed. The low-growing thymes and creeping winter savory are perfect in nooks and crannies of the rock gar-

Leapfrog over the box stores this year with new



den. Dill, cilantro and fennel all add an upright airy effect to the garden, with the added benefit of attracting butterflies. These should be replaced fairly often, because they are prone to bolt to seed quickly.

Selling Herbs

It's easy to sell plants in the spring, but I love herbs because they can also be sold throughout

the year. The months of March, April, May and June are the biggest months for potted herb sales. Smaller pots are grown in the early spring followed by larger pots in the late spring through summer. Mixed herb containers sell well during spring and into fall because the perennial herbs will thrive in the cooler weather. For the holidays, we grow rosemary wreaths, bushes and topiary trees. During the winter months, we sell windowsill herbs in clay pots. We select varieties of rosemary, thyme, oregano, parsley and, of course, sweet basil, that can grow on a sunny window. Always have sweet basil available, even if conditions are completely wrong for it. Customers will demand it.

The interest in herbs as a hobby and a garden item creates a wonderful tie-in with other herbal products such as cosmetics, soaps, lotions and oils. Culinary products such as dried herb mixes, teas, sauces and jellies are also available for tie-ins. There are enough books, flower presses and imaginative herb treats to create unlimited herb gift bas-

kets. Another way to promote herbs would be to feature an herb of the month with recipes or crafts highlighting the featured herb.

The symbolism of herbs cannot be overlooked. These are the perfect plants for weddings and other significant lifetime events. For example, 'Rosemary for Remembrance' was carried at weddings and funerals. A tussie-mussie is often an old-fashioned bouquet of fresh herbs to give to a bride.

Don't miss out on the tremendous opportunities in the expanding herb market. Take the plunge, and increase your variety selection and tie-in product lines dramatically. There's no question about it — the "herbies" will find out about you and seek out your store. Like lemmings throwing themselves over the cliff, they'll be waiting outside your door. It's like a cult — "What's new? What's new?" Take advantage of this important and expanding market. It's thyme to make some money! ✂

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For more flower power, add edible flowers, such as violas, to herb mixed containers.

LearnMore!

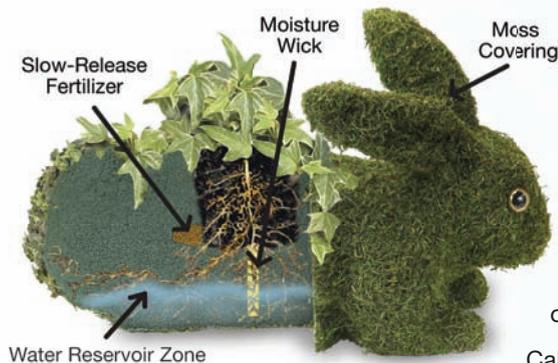
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