

fresh herbs

These four underrepresented herbs have started heating up chef's kitchens and making their way into homeowners' gardens.

By Lisa Morgan

In my recent book, "Homegrown Herb Garden," I tell readers "green is the new black." I am speaking in culinary terms, of course.

Herbs were often referred to as mere "rabbit food" and used only as a decorative garnish on the side of a plate.

Thankfully, this is no longer true. Herbs play a meaningful role in the kitchen, and they can be used in all types of meals and at every step of the preparation process.

The more people are exposed to herbs and learn how to use them, the more they want to cook with them.

One thing I find to be frustrating when writing recipes or teaching cooking classes is that the demand for herbs often outweighs the supply. I am hoping this will change.

There are four herbs at the top of my underrepresented herb list. While they can be found in farmer's markets, and sporadically in the grocery store, overall, they can be difficult to locate. It would be wonderful to have these four herbs in every homeowner's herb garden or in every garden center.

All four are particularly delicious in summer recipes.

1. Chervil: I live part time in Paris where chervil is not only commonplace but used daily.

Knowledge of this herb is gaining in the U.S., but the problem is finding it. Chervil is what I refer to as a "grassy herb." It is the subtlest of all herbs.

It is a smaller, more delicate version of Italian parsley and gives the gentle hint of grass, citrus and anise.

Fresh chervil is used best with delicate foods such as seafood, poultry and eggs. The soft, tiny sprigs are a beautiful addition to vegetables, legumes, salads and even fruit. Chervil can be added in pestos, herb sauces and kitchen cheeses. Due to its subtly, fresh chervil can infuse almost any dish with a light, fresh taste.

A DYNAMIC PAIRING

Chef Lisa Morgan and herb expert Ann McCormick teamed up to write "Homegrown Herb Garden," which starts outside with how to grow, harvest and store herbs before moving inside to the kitchen with how to prepare and use the herbs. The book, complete with many sweet and savory recipes, is published by Quarry Books (www.quarrybooks.com).

2. Sorrel: Although some classify it as both an herb and a vegetable, sorrel tastes a little sour with hints of lemon. It gives a wonderful acidic balance to a dish and can be used raw or cooked.

Raw sorrel leaves cut in chiffonade are a simple way to add a fresh lemony zing to salads, legumes (I love it in lentils or mung beans), salad dressing, poultry, eggs, fish, seafood, sandwiches, potatoes, risottos, pastas, pizza and soup (either as a garnish or a primary component).

Sorrel pairs well with other herbs, greens and vegetables with lemony tones. The leaves can also be puréed raw into pestos and herb sauces.

Whole tender blood sorrel leaves add a touch of visual interest to a dish as well as flavor. I will also use the larger sorrel leaves and stuff them, sometimes with rice.

Sorrel can be cooked, but do not serve it cooked as is because it turns to an unattractive, mushy green, grayish lump. Cooked sorrel is often used to infuse flavor to a cream or sauce, and then the leaves are strained out and discarded. Sorrel sauce is delicious with fish and poultry.

3. Thai basil: Thai basil has more of a peppery-anise taste than sweet basil. It is prevalent in Asian cuisine and, as a result of globalization, there is an increasing demand for it in Europe and the U.S.

It pairs well with sweet, citrusy and spicy foods,

and the whole leaves are added to stir-fries, sautés, soups, pasta dishes and salads.

The fresh notes of Thai basil pair well with sweet squashes, beef, pork, poultry and tropical flavors such as pineapple, mango and coconut.

Small whole leaves can be added to seafood and fish dishes including tartares. Thai basil would be a great ingredient for a barbecue this summer.

4. French tarragon: French tarragon with its small, tiny leaves has a distinctive peppery and slightly licorice taste.

Too much of it can be overwhelming, but just the right amount can turn the most ordinary dish into something memorable.

French tarragon is wonderful in salads and with dairy, stone fruits, poultry and beef.

French tarragon is an excellent complement to starchy foods such as potatoes (mashed or potato salad), pastas and gnocchi. The leaves are generally used raw except in egg dishes. French tarragon is an excellent addition to dressings.

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Lisa Morgan is a private chef in Los Angeles and a graduate of the Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts. She has taught cooking classes in both L.A. and France. You can follow Chef Morgan on her food and travel blog "à table" at www.chefmorgan.com.

