

HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET



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Cooperative Extension
Nassau County



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Herbs for the Garden and Their Uses

An herb is any plant with a useful purpose. Some uses might be as flavorings, fragrances, beverages, dyes, cosmetics, pesticides, economic products, and for sacred or medicinal purposes. There are specific essential oils present in some culinary herb leaves, flowers, seeds, stems, bark and roots, *but not all parts of culinary herbs are edible.*

SOME OF THE MORE COMMON HERBS SUITABLE FOR NEW YORK GARDENS ARE LISTED BELOW.

Except where noted, most herbs like excellent soil drainage, a neutral soil pH and good air circulation for optimal growth.



Sweet Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is a shrubby tropical herb grown as an annual. Sow seeds directly into the ground where they are to grow once the soil has warmed up sufficiently and nighttime temperatures are over 55°F. Plant seeds 1/8 - 1/4 inch deep in rows 12 to 18 inches apart. Thin plants to stand 12 to 18 inches apart in the row. Or, seeds may be started indoors 4-8 weeks before the last expected frost date. While sweet basil grows 1 to 2 1/2 feet tall in full sun, other varieties can be shorter or taller and have different flavors and leaves. If frequently pinched back, basil branches profusely and offers a sizeable harvest of fresh green leaves and white flowers when cut from pre-bloom and early-bloom stage. The flavor is a combination of anise, mint, citrus and clove and combines well with tomato dishes, salads, vegetables, pasta, omelets and soup.

Bay Laurel, Sweet Bay (*Laurus nobilis*) is a tender perennial evergreen tree, grown well in a container or as a houseplant. Bay requires full sun and moist, but not wet soil. It may be shaped into standards, and propagated from cuttings or seeds, although germination is poor. Bring plant indoors before frost. Bay leaves are generally used whole, but remember to remove the leaves from food before serving; they can cause choking if accidentally swallowed. Bay is used in meat and fish dishes, stews, sauces, tomatoes, preserves, pickles, and condiments.

Calendula, Pot Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) is a cool season annual easily grown from seed. Sow 1/2 inch deep directly where it is to grow in early spring, and again in late summer to early fall. Seedlings may also be started indoors 4 to 6 weeks before the last expected frost. Space plants 9 to 12 inches apart in full sun to part shade. It grows 12 to 18 inches tall and spent blossoms should be removed to keep up flower production. Calendula produces more flowers when fed with a phosphorus-rich fertilizer. Its orange or yellow flower petals are used fresh or dried in salads and soups, and as a natural food dye for cheese, butter, custards and vinegars.

Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*) is an apple-scented annual. For direct sowing outdoors, press seed into a light, sandy soil but do not cover. Keep moist until germinated and thin plants to 8 to 12 inches apart, in rows 4 to 32 inches apart. German chamomile grows 6 to 18 inches high and is frequently confused with Roman or English chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), which is a creeping perennial groundcover. Do not use nitrogen-rich fertilizers, which will slow flowering. Harvest flowers while in full bloom. Chamomile may produce up to three crops of flowers annually. The small, white daisy-like flowers are dried and used in herbal teas.

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Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) is a hardy perennial with onion-flavored grassy foliage and may be started from seed. The round and hollow leaves grow to 15 inches tall and can be cut anywhere along the stem, but outer leaves should be harvested first for a neater appearance. Chives prefer moist soil and full sun, but will tolerate part shade, and produce edible mauve pom-pom shaped flowers in late spring. Divide clumps every three to four years. Chives are used in eggs, cheese, potatoes, sour cream, soups, salads and vegetable dishes. The blossoms tint and flavor vinegar.

Cilantro, Coriander, Chinese Parsley (*Coriandrum sativum*) is an annual best grown when planted in early spring or in late summer to early fall. Cilantro bolts quickly in hot summer months; sow fresh seed every three weeks, in full sun, directly where it is to grow for a continual crop. Harvest leaves about 1 month after sowing, and harvest seeds when about half of the seeds have turned gray. While cilantro and coriander are the same plant, the leaves are sometimes referred to as cilantro and the seeds as coriander. The leaves and stems are used in Latin American and Southeast Asian cooking, and the seeds are added to curries, baked goods and some Mediterranean dishes.

Curry Leaf, Mitha neem, Kurry-patha (*Murraya koenigii*) is a small tropical tree that lends itself well to container culture on Long Island. Grow in full sun and keep soil evenly moist. The fragrant, pinnate, shiny dark green leaves are indispensable in Indian curries and should be used fresh. Bring plant indoors before frost. This is not the same herb as curry plant (*Helichrysum italicum*), which has soft, silver-gray needle-like foliage that smells strongly of curry powder and is not recommended for culinary use.

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*) is a cool season annual reaching to almost 2 feet tall, with very finely cut blue-green aromatic foliage. Sow seed 1/4 inch deep directly where plant is to grow, with rows 1 to 3 feet apart. Thin seedlings to 3 or 4 plants per foot in each row. Dill often transplants poorly if its delicate taproots are disturbed. Repeat sowings every few weeks from early spring to late summer for a continual supply of fresh leaves. Harvest seeds as soon as they start to turn brown. Dillweed is used in salads, baked goods, soups and fish and the seeds are essential for making dill pickles.

Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) is an herbaceous perennial growing to about 6 feet tall, and sometimes higher. Fennel likes full sun, but will tolerate partial shade. It likes moist well-drained soil, but can withstand drought too. Fennel can easily become weedy in the garden, but check its spread by cutting off flower stalks before they go to seed. Fennel attracts swallowtail butterflies. Its licorice-scented leaves and stalks are used fresh for flavoring meats, vegetables and beverages. Fennel seeds are used in Italian sausages and often nibbled as a snack in India. Florence fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare dulce*) is a different herb grown for its thick anise-flavored bulb and known as *finocchio* by Italians.

Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is an ancient herb utilized by many cultures. Plant in the fall, about one month before the ground freezes for the winter. With their papery skins intact, set cloves (pointed ends up) 2 inches deep in fertile, well-drained soil. Space 3 to 6 inches apart in rows 12 inches apart, in full sun. Green leaves will emerge in early spring. Water regularly during the growing season, but stop watering 2 to 3 weeks before harvest. Remove any flowering stalks to promote bulb formation. Harvest bulbs by digging carefully, when about 1/2 to 2/3 of the leaves have yellowed and/or fallen over, which usually occurs in early to mid-summer. Let bulbs cure by placing in a dry, dark place for 2 weeks before use. The flower stalks (known as scapes), bulbs and green leaves are all edible.

Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) is a perennial subshrub that demands full sun, good air circulation and very well-drained gravelly soil. A slightly alkaline soil pH (about 7.0) is preferred, and using a light-colored mulch such as white stone, crushed shells or sand will help prevent many diseases. Once established, lavender is somewhat drought tolerant. Propagate by cuttings, as seeds do not always come true. Lightly shape plant by pruning just after flowering. If necessary, lavender may be cut back in spring to new growth. Depending upon the variety, lavender can grow from 9 to 46 inches tall, including the flowering stems, so allow enough space for air circulation. Dried lavender blossoms are added to baked goods and are sometimes a component of the French herb blend, *Herbes de Provence*.

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is a herbaceous perennial growing up to 3 feet tall. It likes full sun, moist but not wet soil and excellent air circulation. Space plants 12 inches apart. Lemon balm can self-sow quite readily, but unwanted seedlings are easily removed. Its minty, lemon leaves are used for custards, puddings, teas and other beverages.

Lemon Grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) is a tropical grass grown as a tender perennial, but also does well as a houseplant. Grow in full sun in moist soil, or at the edge of a water garden. Lemongrass is easily propagated by division. Its fibrous, lemon-scented leaves grow 2 to 3 ft. tall and should be spaced 18 inches apart. Harvest stalks and mince the bulbous lower portions for cooking, or pound with a mortar and pestle. Lemongrass is used in Vietnamese, Thai and Indian cuisine, and in soups, sauces, stir-fries, lemonade, marinades and teas.

Lemon Verbena (*Aloysia triphylla* syn. *Lippia citriodora*) is an intensely lemon-scented tender perennial, grown as an annual or as a houseplant. It needs full sun and moist, but not wet soil. Start by cuttings, layering or from seeds. When brought indoors for the winter it often drops its leaves, but will re-grow when day length increases. As a container plant, lemon verbena needs very well-drained soil. The highly fragrant leaves are used fresh or dried for baking, teas, desserts and lemonade. The dried leaves and stems retain their fragrance and are added to potpourris.

Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) is a herbaceous perennial reaching at least 6 feet in height within a few years. It prefers full sun to partial shade, moist soil and is started by seed or spring division. Cut back the stems of mature plants in mid-summer to 1 foot to encourage new leaf growth. Its strongly flavored leaves, stems and seeds taste like celery and work well in salads, soups, stews, casseroles and stuffings.

Makrut lime leaf syn. Kaffir lime leaf (*Citrus hystrix*) is a tropical tree grown as a container plant. The fragrant green leaves are segmented and the plant produces small, wrinkled fruit. Give it full sun, regular moisture and a balanced fertilizer (especially with some trace minerals included). Makrut is often sold grafted onto a dwarfing rootstock, but remove any suckers that emerge from the soil or below the graft union. Makrut is easily started from very fresh seeds. The tree produces some serious thorns, which can be clipped off. The winged leaves may also be frozen for later use but will not be as flavorful as when used fresh. The fresh leaves are vital in Thai cooking and are thinly sliced and added to curries. The whole leaves are used to flavor soups and sauces, but are removed before serving to prevent accidental choking. Makrut is also used in Indonesian, Malaysian and Vietnamese cooking.

Marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) is a tender perennial grown as an annual. It prefers full sun, moist to somewhat dry soil and can withstand drought once established. Easy to start from seed (pressed into the soil) or from cuttings, marjoram should be spaced 6 to 12 inches apart. The soft gray-green leaves are harvested just before bloom and added to soups, eggs, meats, potatoes, mushrooms and beans.

Mint (*Mentha spp.*) most mints are easily grown perennials and also very invasive garden residents. To keep its roots contained, grow mint in containers above ground or at least realize that once placed in the ground, you will have mint forever. Mint likes full sun to part shade and moist, well-drained soil. There are many different varieties and flavors, but the two most common ones, peppermint (*Mentha x piperata*) and spearmint (*Mentha spicata*), are used with fruit, teas, cold beverages, lamb, desserts, sauces, and in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cooking.

Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum minus*) is an annual grown in full sun for its peppery leaves, flowers and seeds. Soak seeds in warm water overnight before sowing. After danger of spring frost has passed, plant them directly where they are to grow, 3/4 to 1 inch deep, in full sun. Thin dwarf varieties to stand 6 inches apart and climbing varieties to stand 12 inches apart. Nasturtiums will produce more flowers if grown in poor soil. Leaves and flowers are added to salads and the green seeds are pickled and used like capers.

Oregano (*Origanum vulgare* subsp. *hirtum*) is considered the true Greek oregano with strongly scented leaves and white flowers. A perennial, oregano grows 18 inches tall and should be spaced 15 inches apart. It likes full sun and moist to somewhat dry soil. Oregano is used with fish, meat dishes, pizza, tomato dishes and sauces, and in Mediterranean cooking.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum neapolitanum*) is a biennial usually grown as an annual in order to ensure a good supply of tender leaves. Germination is improved when seeds are soaked for 3 days in warm water. In early spring, sow seeds 1/4 inch deep, 3/8 to 2 inches apart, in rows 18 to 22 inches apart. Harvest by cutting stems 2 inches above the crown. Flat-leaved Italian parsley is considered to have the best flavor, but curly parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) and the root of Hamburg parsley (*Petroselinum crispum tuberosum*) are also used. Parsley is high in several vitamins, good for salt-restricted diets and improves the flavor of almost any food it's cooked with. Parsley is best when used fresh as it loses much of its flavor when dried, but can be frozen to be added later to soups and stews. When chewed, fresh parsley makes a good breath freshener.

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is a semi-evergreen bushy perennial. Take cuttings in late fall to early winter of new, non-flowering stems and grow on indoors to have new plants for spring. Set out 15 to 24 inches apart in full sun to light shade, and moist to lightly dry soil. Pinch the growing tips back of new plants to make them bushier. Prune entire plant back 1/3 in spring before new growth starts. The nubby, gray-green leaves are used in sausages, stuffings, condiments, pasta, vegetables, liqueurs and many other dishes.

Salad Burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*) is an evergreen perennial grown in full sun. Sow seeds 1/2 inch deep directly in the ground in moist, but not wet soil and thin 12 to 15 inches apart. Growing about 18 inches tall, its small green and red flowers should be removed to encourage leaf production. The delicately toothed leaves have a light cucumber flavor and are delicious in salads, dressings, soups and sauces.

Scented Pelargoniums, Scented Geraniums (*Pelargonium spp.*) are tender perennials native to South Africa. With over 450 known varieties, fragrances range from rose, apple, citrus, coconut, peppermint, nutmeg, pine and so on. Most like full sun and somewhat dry soil. While all parts of scented pelargoniums are considered safe to eat, generally it is the fragrant leaves that are used in baking, cold beverages and to scent sugars. Scented pelargoniums grow very well in the landscape, in containers or as houseplants. Cuttings should be taken in late summer to start new plants for next spring.

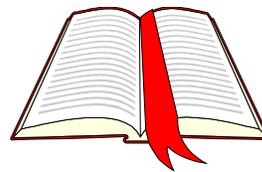
Sorrel (*Rumex scutatus*) is a hardy perennial, emerging in early spring. In early spring, sow seed outdoors 1/4 inch deep in rich moist soil. Sorrel prefers full sun to part shade and grows about 18 inches tall. Thin seedlings 6 to 8 inches apart. Remove flower stalks to encourage leaf production. The light green, spear-shaped leaves of true French sorrel have a lightly sour, lemony flavor. Common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) has larger leaves and a more acidic taste. Sorrel may turn bitter during hot summer months, but taste improves once cooler weather returns in the fall. Young sorrel leaves are used in soups, salads, sauces, or with eggs, fish and vegetables.

Summer Savory (*Satureja hortensis*) is a bushy annual growing 18 inches tall. Because they need light to germinate, press seeds into soil in early spring. Thin plants to 6 inches apart and grow in full sun and moist to dry soil. Savory grows quickly and should be pinched back to encourage branching. Its narrow, dark green oregano-scented leaves are used in soups, sauces, meat dishes and with vegetables like beans or cabbage. Winter savory (*Satureja montana*) is a lower-growing perennial relative, but its leaves have a sharper, less refined flavor.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is a perennial shrub usually grown as an annual. Depending on the cultivar, it grows about 18 inches tall, unless you select a low-growing prostrate variety. Rosemary is difficult to start from seed and should be grown from cuttings. While rosemary can be winter-hardy on Long Island, it needs a protected location such as a south-facing wall to bring it safely through to spring. It likes full sun, moist but not wet, well-drained soil, and good air circulation. Rosemary flowers in late winter/early spring, can be trained into topiary shapes and pruned whenever necessary. Indoors, it should be given a very sunny window, a cool room with good air circulation, and not be allowed to ever completely dry out. Rosemary's pine-scented needle-like foliage is added to potatoes, meat dishes, breads and many other foods.

Tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) is a perennial with a delicate anise taste. French tarragon likes full sun, well-drained fertile soil and good air circulation. Space plants 15 to 24 inches apart. True French tarragon does not produce seed and must be started from cuttings or division. Tarragon seed sold in the trade is generally Russian tarragon, which is almost flavorless. Harvest tarragon by removing stems, which will also improve air circulation in the plant. A thick mulch of white sand will help minimize diseases, as will dividing plants every 3 to 5 years. Tarragon is used in eggs, salads, dressings, sauces, with poultry and in French cuisine.

Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) is a low-growing perennial. It likes full sun, very well-drained, moist to somewhat dry soil. Space 12 to 18 inches apart. Prune plant back 1/3 to 1/2 in early spring, unless it was pruned hard in late summer the year before. Regular pruning during the growing season improves the health of the plant and increases leaf production. Thyme often does not come true from seed and therefore cuttings are recommended. There are numerous thymes with varied habits, leaf textures and fragrances such as lemon, caraway, coconut and orange. Use thyme with meat, vegetables, seafood, tea and eggs.



SUGGESTED READING:

- ◆ *The Herb Society of America Encyclopedia of Herbs & Their Uses*, by Deni Bown
- ◆ *The Big Book of Herbs*, by Arthur O. Tucker, Ph.D. & Thomas DeBaggio
- ◆ *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs*, Rodale Press

HERBS TO REPEL INSECTS

Herb	Uses or Pests Repelled	Suggest Planting With
Basil	asparagus beetle, bean beetle, fly, mosquito	bean, pepper, tomato
Bee balm	enhances plant growth	tomato, all plants
Borage	tomato hornworm	bean, squash, strawberry, tomato
Calendula	tomato hornworm, some nematodes	tomato
Catnip	aphid, Colorado potato bug, flea beetle	vegetables or ornamental plants
Chamomile	enhances plant growth	all plants
Chervil	enhances plant growth	radish
Cilantro/Coriander	Colorado potato bug	potato
Chives	aphid, Japanese beetle	carrot, grape, rose, tomato
Dandelion	encourages fruitset and ripening	fruit trees
Dill	cabbageworm, cabbage looper, tomato hornworm	cabbage, lettuce, onion, tomato
Flax	Colorado potato bug	carrot, potato
Garlic	aphid, Japanese beetle, rabbits, spider mite	peach, raspberry, rose
Horseradish	blister beetle, potato bug	potato
Hyssop	cabbage looper, cabbage moth	cabbage, grape
Leek	carrot fly	carrot, celery
Lovage	enhances plant growth	all plants
Marigold	aphids, some nematodes, rabbits, whitefly	potato, rose, tomato
Marjoram	enhances plant growth	all plants
Mint	ants, flea beetle, mice	cabbage, tomato
Onion	carrot fly	beet, cabbage, carrot, strawberry, tomato
Parsley	asparagus beetle, carrot fly	asparagus, carrot, rose, tomato
*Pennyroyal	ants, cabbage looper, fleas	broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage
Radish	cabbage maggot, squash vine borer	bean, kohlrabi, squash
Rosemary	bean beetle, carrot fly, mosquito	bean, cabbage, carrot, sage
*Rue	cats, flea beetle, Japanese beetle	fig, raspberry, rose
Sage	cabbage looper, cabbage maggot, carrot fly	cabbage, carrot, grape, tomato, strawberry
Savory	Mexican bean beetle, enhances plant growth	bean, onion
*Southernwood	cabbageworm, flea beetle, mosquito	all plants
*Tansy	attracts ladybugs, repels ants, Japanese beetle	blackberry, raspberry, rose
Thyme	cabbageworm, cabbage looper, whitefly	cabbage, eggplant, potato, tomato
*Wormwood	ants, codling moth, mice, slugs and snails	cabbage
*Yarrow	increases plant fragrance	most aromatic herbs
<i>*Pennyroyal, Rue, Southernwood, Tansy, Wormwood and Yarrow should not be eaten.</i>		

This fact sheet was researched and written by Master Gardener Donna Gerbosi-DiFulvio '01.