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Taste, Smell and Feeling Well ... The Many Facets of Herbs

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What is an “herb”?

- The word “herb” comes from the Latin word herba, meaning grass, green stalks, or blades
- In botany, the term herb refers to an herbaceous plant, defined as a small, seed-bearing plant without a woody stem in which all aerial parts (i.e., above ground) die back to the ground at the end of each growing season
 - Some herbs do come from woody stems, such as the bay leaf
- Most herbs are perennials, but some are annuals (e.g., basil, dill) or biennials (e.g., parsley, caraway)

The Use of Herbs over the Ages

- The use of herbs has been important to all cultures since long before history was recorded
 - Herbs are mentioned in Genesis, the first chapter of the Bible, and throughout its text
 - Egyptian schools of herbalists have existed since 3000 B.C.
 - There is evidence that herbs were used for medicinal purposes in India and Mesopotamia as early as 5,000 years ago
- The earliest collection of written articles about medicinal herbs and plants was compiled by a Greek surgeon in approximately 77 A.D.
- By medieval times, large quantities of culinary herbs were in use, as well as the use of spices and herbs as food preservatives
- Many herbs have symbolic meaning that goes back centuries, even millennia
 - Ancient Romans offered wreaths of bay leaves as a symbol of triumph and peace
 - Bay was thought to be sacred by the Greeks and to be a protector from disease, witchcraft and lightning
 - In England, rosemary was called “Rose of Mary” in memory of the Virgin Mary



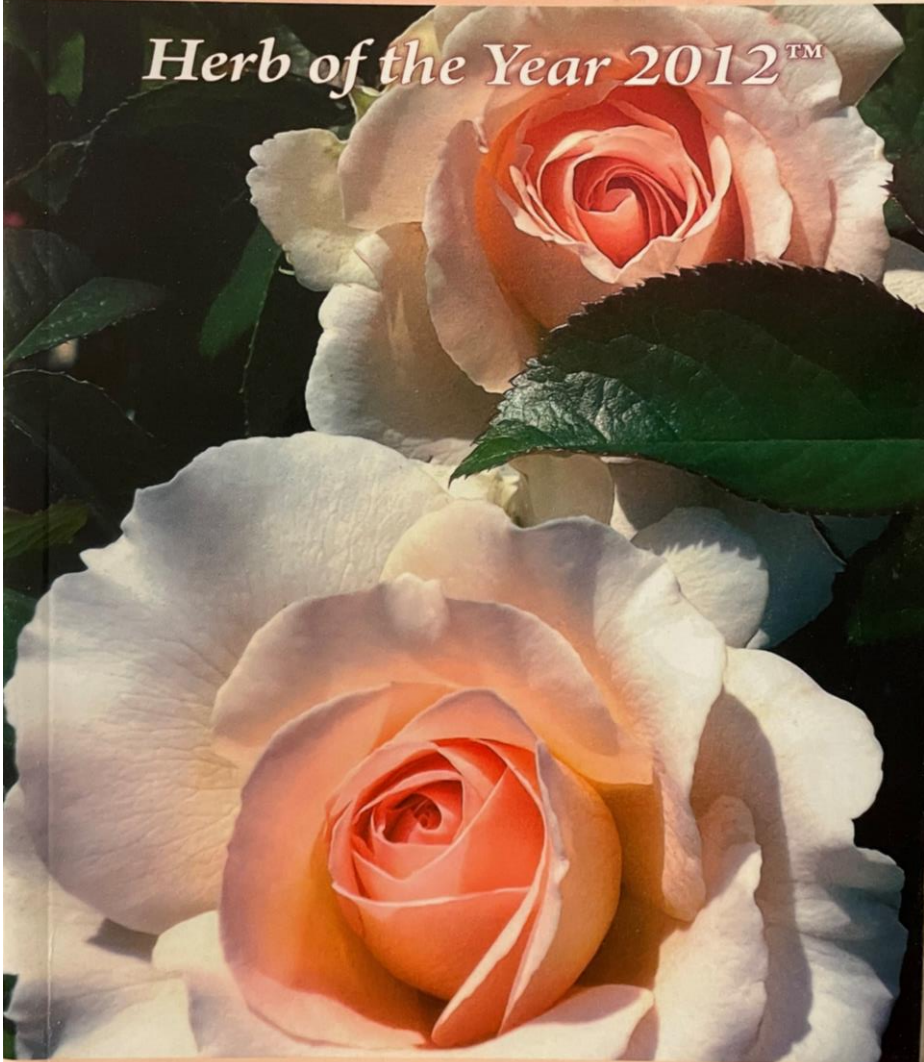


Herbs vs. Spices

- “Leaves vs. seeds”
- Temperate climates vs. tropical climates
- Spices tend to be stronger in flavor because made from crushed portions of the plant especially rich in essential oils
- Sometimes a plant can be both
 - *Coriandrum sativum*: Cilantro leaves and Coriander seeds
 - Dill weed and Dill seeds
- Salt is neither – it’s a mineral

Rose (*Rosa*)

Herb of the Year 2012™



International Herb Association

Did you know these plants are considered Herbs?

- Roses
- Marigolds
- Dandelions
- Agave
- Aloe Vera
- Hops
- Mistletoe (despite poisonous berries)
- Horseradish



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Culinary Uses of Herbs

- Provide little nutritional value – primarily used for flavoring
- Use of culinary herbs became widespread during medieval times
- In the days prior to any refrigeration:
 - Used to mask the foul odors and tastes of rotten food
 - Aid in digestion of fibrous vegetables and greasy meats
- Most common use of herbs by home gardeners
- Dried herbs are more concentrated than fresh herbs by 3-4 times

Common Culinary Herbs



Photo: Jamie Oliver





Aromatic Uses of Herbs

- Our sense of smell is an important function:
 - Gather information
 - Elicit certain feelings
- Applications in cooking, aromatherapy and the perfume industry
- Essential oils are often substituted for the natural plant but should be used with caution due to their concentration



Aromatic Herbs

- Aromatherapy:
 - Lavender – relaxation; relieves headaches
 - Mint – recovers and refreshes the spirit
 - Thyme – invigorating; raises the spirits
 - Old Rose – calming
 - Eucalyptus – clears the mind
- Moth preventatives:
 - Sweetest smelling: Lavender, Thyme, Mint
 - Most effective: Santolina, Southernwood, Sweet Woodruff, Tansy and Wormwood



Medicinal Uses of Herbs

- Over history, herbs have long been “reputed” to have curative properties
- Medical remedies used by the Greeks and the Romans were essentially herbal
- Antiseptic, stimulant, anesthetic or tranquilizer uses were superseded by synthetic drugs over time
- Older plant wisdom is being reassessed, motivated by a renewed awareness of the natural world and the unacceptable side effects of many drugs
- Many medicinal herbs can react with certain drugs, so always consult with your doctor



Some Common Medicinal Herbs

- Calendula – skin healing
- Chamomile – relaxant; mild sedative
- Dandelion – diuretic properties for liver and kidney health
- Garlic – boosts immune system by increasing and stimulating production of white blood cells
- Ginger – stomach issues, including nausea
- Peppermint – digestive aid; anti-spasmodic properties
- St. John's Wort – anti-depressant





Growing Herbs

- Most herbs grow best in full sun, while some can tolerate partial shade
- Regular watering is important, but herbs don't like "wet feet"
- Good candidates for container gardens
 - Can mix with flowering plants or vegetables
 - May ensure better soil quality/drainage
 - Helps contain invasive herbs like mint
- Many herbs can "winter-over" in our area, especially if protected
 - Use dried leaves in the Fall as mulch
 - Move to an unheated garage/sunny outdoor location
- Growing herbs indoors requires strong light





Storing Fresh Herbs

- Store upright in a jar or glass of water in the refrigerator:
 - Cut ½ inch off the bottom of stems and remove lower leaves that would sit in the water
 - Add enough water to cover roughly 1 inch of the bottom of the stems, then loosely cover leaves with a plastic bag
 - Change water daily and trim stems each time, as well as removing any wilted or browning leaves/stems
 - EXCEPTION: Basil is best stored at room temperature using the process above since it is not cold-resistant
- Alternate method is to wrap the herbs in a paper towel, put in a plastic bag and store in the refrigerator



Drying Herbs

- Drying methods:
 - Air drying
 - Dehydrator
 - Microwave – convenient but can degrade the taste of many herbs
- Make sure completely dry before storing
 - Check to make sure no signs of condensation
 - Dispose of any that have started to mold
- Leave whole until ready to use
 - Retain more oils when kept whole
 - Crumbling releases the oils when you need them
- Herbs with succulent leaves or high moisture content retain flavor better with freezing rather than drying (e.g., basil, chives, mint)

MG Herb Garden at the Chester County Government Services Center - 601 Westtown Road, West Chester



- Basil (multiple varieties)
- Catnip
- Chamomile
- Chives
- Curry Plant
- Dill
- Eucalyptus
- Fennel
- Garlic Chives
- Germander
- Hyssop
- Lavender
- Lemon Balm
- Lemongrass
- Lovage
- Marjoram
- Mint (multiple varieties)
- Nasturtium
- Oregano
- Parsley
- Red-veined Dock
- Rosemary
- Sage (multiple varieties)
- Santolina
- Sorrel
- Southernwood
- St. John's Wort
- Stevia
- Sweet Woodruff
- Tarragon



Questions?



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Thank you!



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