

A Guide to Herbs and Their Uses



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for Renu-Karoo Veld Rehabilitation CC*

Introduction

Even the most reluctant chef can appreciate the value of herbs in the kitchen. A small handful can breathe life into the simplest of dishes. The fresher, the better, as the flavour and nutrient content of herbs degrade with drying out.

Not only are herbs useful in flavoring food, they made welcome and attractive additions to gardens of all shapes and sizes.

Herbs in the Kitchen

- ☞ **Basil** (*Ocimum sp.*): A variety of different kinds of basil are available and each has its own flavour. **Sweet basil** is best known as a compliment to tomato-based sauces and is a popular addition to Italian-style cuisine. It can also be added fresh to salads. **Greek basil** has smaller leaves than its cousin and also can be added to salads. **Sacred basil** gets its name from the Hindu belief that it is holy. Its use differs from that of Greek and sweet basil and is commonly used in stir-frys and Thai cooking.
- ☞ **Borage** (*Borago officinalis*): Young leaves have a cool, cucumber flavour. This herb can be added chopped up into cream cheese or salads for a refreshing taste.
- ☞ **Coriander** (*Coriandrum sativum*): A popular addition to masala and curries, this is a hardy herb that can withstand harsh climates.
- ☞ **Curry plant** (*Helichrysum sp*): This herb does not have as strong a flavour as its scent suggests, however a sprig can be inserted in chicken while cooking. It can be added to rice and vegetables to enhance flavour. This plant is happiest in 20cm diameter containers.
- ☞ **Garlic chives** (*Allium tuberosum*): This variety of chive has a garlic taste when young and can be used in a variety of dishes. However, all chives must be added to the cooking toward the end, as they lose flavour.

- ☞ **Lavender** (*Lavendula* sp.) This is a distinctively attractive garden herb than can be used to flavour jelly and in biscuits.
- ☞ **Lemon balm** (*Melissa officinalis*): While this herb does not cook well, there are many other uses it can have in a kitchen such as flavoring cheeses. Fresh leaves can also be added to vinegar for salad dressings.
- ☞ **Lemon grass** (*Cymbopogon atratus*): The perfect compliment to Thai, Vietnamese or Caribbean style cooking, this herb can also be used with seafood.
- ☞ **Lemon verbena** (*Aloysia triphylla*): Having its origins in Chile, this herb can be used in puddings and cakes and may also be infused in finger bowls to create a refreshing scent.
- ☞ **Marjoram** (*Origanum* sp.): This herb is a close relative to oregano and assists in digestion. It also has antiseptic properties and can be added as a preserve. It best goes with fish dishes.
- ☞ **Mint** (*Mentha* sp.): There are many varieties of mint available and they all compliment fish and meat dishes. A jelly can be made which traditionally is used on lamb roast. Mint also makes a refreshing tea.
- ☞ **Oregano** (*Origanum vulgare*): Like its relative, marjoram, oregano aids digestion and has antiseptic properties. It goes well in tomato-based sauces and is often used on pizzas.
- ☞ **Parsley** (*Petloselium* sp.): Parsley is most known for its ability to freshen breath. It is rich in nutrients and should be added just before the end of cooking.
- ☞ **Rosemary** (*Rosemarinus officinalis*): The definitive companion to Karoo lamb, rosemary can also be used in oils and vinegars. A sprig may be placed on the braai for flavour.
- ☞ **Rue** (*Ruta graveolens*): This is a bitter herb, but can be added finely chopped to egg, fish and cheese.
- ☞ **Sage** (*Salvia officianalis*): An aid to the digestion of fatty food, sage is also an anti-septic and, when cooked with

meat, kills bacteria. It can be used with honey and goes well in fruit salads.

∞ **Salad burnet** (*Sanguisorba major*): This herb has a nutty flavour and is added to salads. When used in cooking, it is best added at the beginning.

∞ The latin name *Sanguisorba* has it's origins in salad burnet's ability to staunch the bloodflow of wounds (*Sanguis* = blood).

∞ **Winter Savory** (*Satureja montana*): This compliments dishes with vegetables, pulses and rich meats. It can be used as an appetite stimulant and aids digestion.

Bouquet Garni

A bouquet garni is a combination of fresh herbs that is placed in a small muslin bag and added to stews. This bag is then removed after cooking. This is handy as the twigs and such from the herbs do not taint the food, but the full flavour is still present.

½ cup parsley stalks
2 springs thyme
2 springs marjoram
2 bay leaves

The above is a suggestion but it can be varied with the addition of winter savory, celery and rosemary.



References

- McVicar, J. (2007) *Jekka's Complete Herb Book* (Revised edition).
The Royal Horticultural Society, London.
- Roberts, M. (1988) *Margaret Roberts Cooks With Herbs and Spices*. The Southern Book Publishers, Cape Town.