

RHS Campaign for School Gardening



Supported by **Waitrose**

Easy Herbs to Grow in Schools

Schools can grow their own culinary herbs easily to use in cookery activities



Introducing herbs

Herb is a general term that covers a whole range of plants. Culinary herbs release aromatic oils when rubbed or cut and are used in cooking to enhance the flavour of food. Herbs have also been used by for thousands of years as medicines, perfumes and insect repellents.

The interesting history of herbs and their many scents help to stimulate children's senses, bringing a visit outside to the school garden alive. Herbs grown in schools can be used to support curriculum work in science, history, even maths and literacy.

Growing herbs

Choosing the site

Many herbs originate from Mediterranean regions of the world. To grow these herbs well you need a sunny, sheltered site with free-draining soil. Heat and dryness also help to intensify the flavour. Check the pH of your soil. Many Mediterranean herbs prefer alkaline soils and may not tolerate an acid soil. Most herbs will survive the cool



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British winter temperatures, but not the wet, so a free-draining soil is necessary to avoid roots rotting. Alternatively, grow the herbs in containers of free-draining compost in a sunny spot.

Not all herbs need full sun so don't despair if you don't have a sunny bed. Herbs such as parsley, rocket, sweet cicely, sorrel, mint, chervil and even basil will be fine in some shade and enjoy the moisture-rich soil.

Design and layout of a herb garden.

If you are lucky to have the space then you can create a herb garden at your school. Try to locate the herb garden where it is easily accessible for regular picking. A simple rectangular bed can be used for mixed herb planting. Place stepping stones throughout the bed to allow children to step amongst the herbs to pick them.

A large tractor tyre makes a great herb garden. Line it with plastic to prevent zinc leaching into soil. The Growing Schools Garden at Hampton Court garden in 2002 had a medieval herb garden book – here's the link::

www.growingschools.org.uk/Resources/Downloads/Final%20Medieval%20herb%20bed.pdf

More complex designs could be based on the formal design of an Elizabethan knot garden, edged by box or lavender. A circular design could be based on a wheel with different herbs filling the spaces between the spokes. Raised beds either side of a seat is a way of enjoying the smells of herbs at the right level.

Preparing the site

Ensure the bed is free of perennial weeds before planting. Use hand forks and full-sized forks to dig over the ground to at least a fork's depth, removing any perennial roots you find. Incorporate grit and some organic matter, such as leaf mould or garden compost, if the soil is heavy.

Planting

Ensure that each herb has enough growing space. Plant taller herbs such as bay or rosemary at back of the bed, so they do not cast shade over the rest. Plant perennial herbs through a weed-suppressant membrane to reduce maintenance. Leave clear areas to sow annual herbs; these will have to be sown each year.

Herbs in containers

Herbs grow well in containers. If space is limited, or your soil is not suitable for some herbs you can create the right conditions for herbs in a container. Use an old sink, a large pot, a tub trug – anything that will hold compost. The larger the better, to hold on to moisture and nutrients. Drill some holes in the base to allow for drainage. Use a soil-based compost with added grit for drainage.

Annual maintenance

Herbs in beds will need some annual maintenance, but are generally easy to maintain. Herbaceous herbs need to be cut back in the spring to encourage strong healthy growth. Woody herbs such as rosemary, lavender, sage and thyme benefit from pruning any frost damaged or dead branches in late spring. Pruning after flowering will encourage new strong growth. Fertiliser is not generally necessary.



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Herbs in containers will need feeding and watering well, simply because they are being grown in a limited space. More vigorous herbs such as mints need re-potting each year. Slower growing herbs such as thyme can benefit from replenishment of the top part of the compost; remove the top 5cm and add fresh compost.

Herbs as companion plants

Many herbs have nectar-rich flowers that will attract beneficial insects into your garden, to help with pollination and pest control. Growing herbs amongst your vegetables and flowers may also help in pest and disease control, and can make an interesting experiment. Try planting sage next to cabbage-family plants to repel cabbage-white butterflies, chives next to apples to prevent apple scab, or next to roses to prevent blackspot.

Easy culinary herbs to grow in schools

Herbs to grow from seed

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)

Know it! Basil is a half-hardy annual, native of India, the Middle East and some Pacific Islands. It has been cultivated in the Mediterranean for thousands of years, but only spread to Western Europe in the 16th Century. Its common name is thought to be derived for the Greek *basilikon* meaning kingly herb. It is said to have grown around Christ's tomb and Greek Orthodox churches use it to prepare their holy water.

Grow it! Sow from seed in mid-spring on a warm windowsill or greenhouse. Plant outside in late May or early June once frosts have passed.

Eat it! Use leaves fresh on pizzas and in tomato soups.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*)

Know it! This is probably the best-known herb in the West. It is native to central and southern Europe. The Greeks didn't eat parsley, but used it to decorate their tombs. The Romans used it to discourage intoxication and strong odours.

Grow it! Parsley is a biennial plant. The seeds germinate and grow leaves in the first year, then flower, set seed and die in the second year. Soak the seeds in warm water then sow in spring in pots on a warm window-sill or greenhouse. Plant out when large enough to handle easily. Make a second sowing in late summer to continue production into autumn. Protect with cloches over winter.

Eat it! Parsley is rich in vitamin C, and seems to enhance the flavour of food. Chopped parsley can be mixed with butter for baked potatoes or used as a garnish for salads and soups. It is a main ingredient of bouquet garni. Italian or flat-leaved parsley may be better for children as its leaves are not crispy.

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*)

Know it! The leaves and ripe seeds have two distinct flavours. The seeds are sweet and aromatic; the leaves are pungent and lemony. Coriander is native to southern Europe and the Middle East. It was introduced to northern Europe by the Romans to



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preserve meat, together with cumin and vinegar. Its name is derived from the Greek *koris* meaning bed bug – its strong smell is similar to this insect!

Grow it! It is best sown direct in the soil outside in short rows starting in April to June. Seeds sown in pots tend to run to seed. If you do sow them inside, sow into modules then plant out when large enough.

Eat it! Seeds can be ground to add to curries, but also apple pies, cakes and biscuits. The leaves are chopped and added to curries, stews and salads.

Herbs to grow from cuttings

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)

Know it! *Salvia* is derived from the Latin 'to heal'. It was regarded as a medicinal herb by the Greeks to heal ulcers and snake bites. The Romans considered it to be sacred and good for the memory. The Chinese valued it and would trade three chests of tea for one of sage. There is an ancient proverb – 'How can a man grow old who has sage in his garden?'

Grow it! Buy small plants in spring. Take cuttings from established plants in early summer. Plant sage amongst your cabbages – it is reputed to deter whitefly.

Eat it! Sage can be chopped and mashed into butter for a savoury spread on bread. It can be finely chopped and added to scones.

Mint (*Mentha* species)

Know it! Mint is a native of Europe and has been cultivated for its medicinal properties since ancient times. It was found in Egyptian tombs, and in Japan they have been making menthol from mint for over 2000 years. There are many species and cultivars. Try *Mentha x piperita f. citrata* 'Chocolate' – this has a peppermint flavour with deep chocolate undertones!

Grow it! Mints are invasive so are best planted in pots. These can be sunk into the ground. Mint can be propagated from underground runners as well as stems. Cut healthy runners into 5-7cm sections with a node (joint) in each section. Push the cuttings vertically into free-draining compost (50% compost 50% grit or perlite). Even if you do not want more plants, its best to lift and divide mint every few years.

Mint can be forced in the winter to have a fresh supply of leaves. Lay a runner along the length of a seed tray. Cover with compost, water and bring into a warm room. Fresh shoots should sprout in a couple of weeks.

Eat it! Chop mint leaves into chocolate mouse. Make a refreshing mint tea.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)

Know it! The Latin name means sea dew which may come from its habit of growing close to the sea and its blue, dew-like flowers. In Elizabethan times rosemary was a symbol of love, faithfulness and fidelity at weddings. It was used to freshen the air in plague times.

Grow it! Buy rosemary in pots and plant in late spring. Semi-ripe cuttings of rosemary can be made in late summer and autumn. Rosemary planted with carrots is said to repel carrot fly.

Eat it! The leaves can be used to flavour pizza, bread and scones and are great with roast potatoes.

Thyme (*Thymus* species)



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Know it! This is an ancient herb used by the Egyptians in embalming oil. The Greeks used it in their baths and as incense in their temples. Romans used it to purify rooms and in Britain it was put in nosegays to keep away the smell of disease.

Grow it! Whilst thyme can be grown from seed it is easier to buy as pot-grown plants. Softwood cuttings can be taken in late spring to early summer when there is the first flush of growth, or semi-ripe cuttings at the end of the summer.

Eat it! Thyme aids digestion and helps break down fatty foods. It is used to flavour soups, casseroles and fish, and is one of the main ingredients in a bouquet garni.

Herbs to grow from division

Herbaceous (and some bulbous) plants can be propagated by division in the spring and autumn. Lift clumps of the herb and divide into smaller pieces, removing any sections of the original plant that appear old, damaged or dead. Replant healthy, young growth and discard older growth in the centre of the clump. This rejuvenates the plant and allows you to make more plants.

Marjoram or Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*)

Know it! A Mediterranean plant whose name is derived from the Greek *oros* meaning mountain and *ganos* meaning joy. In ancient times it was woven into the crowns worn by bridal couples. It grows wild in Britain but was probably introduced by the Romans. Here it is known as marjoram; in Mediterranean countries the same plant is known as oregano.

Grow it! Buy plants in pots and plant in sunny position with free-draining soil.

Eat it! Marjoram aids digestion and acts as an antiseptic and as a preservative. It is sometimes included in bouquet garni and is added to pizza and tomato dishes.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

Know it! Chives are a member of the onion family and form small bulbs, dying back to below ground each winter. They have been grown in China since 300BC, and were used as an antidote to poisoning.

Grow it! Chives can be grown from seed sown in pots indoors from March or outside from May. Seedlings are slow growing and division of an established clump gives quicker results. Divide clumps every three to four years in spring. Bring some inside to force growth in the winter for fresh leaves. Chives planted next to apple trees may help to prevent scab and next to roses may reduce the fungal disease blackspot. There is an old saying 'chives next to roses creates posies'.

Eat it! The thin leaves of chives, when cut up finely, add a mild oniony flavour to green salads, potato salads, jacket potatoes, butter and soups. Remember to leave some leaves to strengthen the bulb each year.



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Further information

Websites

Garden Organic has a range of herb-growing cards that you can download
www.gardenorganic.org.uk/growyourown/Herbs-complete.pdf

The Herb Expert has growing and cooking information www.herbexpert.co.uk

The Herb Society has lesson plans and activities for schools relating to a range of curriculum areas www.herbsociety.org.uk/schools/index.htm

RHS Books

Jekka's Complete Herb Book by Jekka McVicar ISBN 978 1 85626 780 9
Encyclopaedia of all garden herbs, how to grow them, useful recipes and historical information

Royal Horticultural Society Herbs: Simple Steps to Success by William Dene
ISBN 9781405335492
Easy steps to growing herbs and building simple herb gardens and containers.

Suppliers of herbs

These suppliers have worked directly with school projects

Norfolk Herbs www.norfolkherbs.co.uk

Rocket Gardens www.rocketgardens.co.uk

