



The beginner's guide to HERBS



Spring is the key time to plant these aromatic culinary champions. They not only taste great but also bring structure and scent to our gardens, says expert **Pattie Barron**

Ask me why herbs are my garden heroes and the list is long: they're decorative, tactile, weather-resistant, highly aromatic, hugely useful and delightfully low-maintenance. Pollinators adore them, while pests are deterred by those strong, potent scents. Many herbs are evergreen, adding valuable structure to the garden year-round. Some have medicinal properties, too, while others are kitchen champions, infusing dishes with wonderful flavour and fragrance. No other plant group can boast that many credentials.

I've trialled many different herbs in beds, borders and containers over the years, but my real passion is for Mediterranean herbs, resplendent in shades of green, grey and silver, and drought-proof by nature. For me, relaxing in my gravel garden filled with billowing clumps of lavenders, sages, thymes and oreganos is the ultimate stress-buster. That heady potpourri of scents, redolent of Provençal fields and Cretan hillsides, is truly intoxicating. In high summer, the garden buzzes with colour that brings in the bees and butterflies in droves.

I'm lucky enough to be able to forage for herbs in my borders and raised beds, but if I just had room for a group of pots, my choice would be the six herb heroes on the following pages. I couldn't be without them – and nor should you. ➔

HOW TO START A HERB GARDEN

- The first step is to buy several same-sized, machine-moulded terracotta pots. Choose large ones, so you can take generous prunings rather than teeny-tiny snips.

- For planting, use peat-free multipurpose compost with enough horticultural grit to make the mix free-draining. Herbs need free drainage so their roots don't rot. Raising pots off the ground on a plant stand, pot feet or bricks will ensure plants don't sit in wet compost. Mint is an exception, preferring a soil-based compost that retains water.

- Mulch around herb plants with grit for a neat finish that also helps to keep the foliage clean.

- Clipping herbs for the kitchen will coax fresh growth from spring to autumn. Always take cuttings from shoot tips.

- Treat them mean, keep them keen: in the wild, herbs thrive on poor soil that's low in nutrients, so be wary of overwatering and overfeeding. Water in the morning, not the evening. A dilute seaweed feed once-weekly in summer is plenty.

- An advantage of planting herbs in containers is you can move them. To bring out the best of those volatile oils, site your herbs in a warm, sunny spot that is, of course, within easy reach of the kitchen.



MINT

You might well pick your mint from waste ground, but if you're buying one to grow, the best all-rounder for tea, cocktails, Greek tzatziki, Indian raita and more is Moroccan mint. It has the finest flavour and deserves your largest pot, trough or window box so you'll always have plenty. Just keep it contained or it'll spread like wildfire. Furry-leaved mints are less invasive. Ginger, apple and pineapple mints taste – and smell – just as they sound. Pineapple mint, with vanilla-edged soft green foliage, makes the prettiest dessert decoration, while dark-leaved chocolate mint chopped finely and folded through vanilla ice cream is a revelation. However, Eau-de-Cologne mint should be kept out of the kitchen – no one wants food tasting of perfume! But whatever you do, don't mix your mints; when planted together, they end up tasting the same, so keep them in separate containers. When you come to harvest it, always cut off whole stems rather than individual leaves. ➡



OREGANO

This spicy-scented herb transforms a takeaway pizza and ensures a Greek salad is the real deal. Aubergine parmigiana wouldn't be the same without it, and oregano is a key ingredient in chef Ottolenghi's favourite spice blend, za'atar. Garden centres and nurseries stock many varieties, but for the best flavour, avoid large-flowered, ornamental oreganos and seek out *Origanum vulgare*, the authentic wild marjoram that delivers the most robust punch and is equally good fresh or dried. I let oregano run free in my veg beds and around fruit bushes because the mauve flowers attract beneficial insects while the strong fragrance of the deep green leaves deters aphids: win-win. If you grow oregano in a small space or container, go for the lower-growing 'Compactum'.



TARRAGON

Artemisia dracunculus is a lesser-known, lesser-grown herb, which is a great shame because that delicate aniseed flavour is superb with chicken and fish. Fresh tarragon is also an essential for Béarnaise sauce. And here's the key to success: be sure to buy the more refined French tarragon, rather than Russian, which doesn't have the same sophisticated flavour. In summer, tarragon will form a tall, bushy plant, up to 90cm. As it's not hardy, plant tarragon in a pot so you can bring it into a frost-free place over winter. The French chop the leaves finely and add to omelettes; I do the same with my breakfast scrambled egg. In late summer, I cut some stems, blanch them and steep in white wine vinegar for a month, so I can enjoy that wonderful flavour on my salads throughout the year. ♦♦



THYME

Perhaps the most versatile herb in the garden, easy-growing thyme is equally at home edging a border, forming strokable cushions in containers or growing in gravel. King Charles showcased myriad creeping thymes in his celebrated thyme walk at Highgrove; a less ambitious scheme could be to plant thyme in between paving stones, or even replace a few with it entirely. If you walk on thyme, you won't harm it – you'll release that familiar earthy, peppery aroma that shakes up stocks, stews, fish and chicken dishes. By the back door, I grow different thymes at clipping height in a wooden table inset with a shallow planting bed filled with compost and perlite. I've also planted a terracotta bowl with different thymes, from gold to deep green, making a striking textural tapestry. There are so many thymes to savour; the UK's queen of herbs, Jekka McVicar, grows more than 70 varieties at her herb farm in Gloucestershire (jekkas.com). ♦♦

MINT

Popular in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cuisines, fresh mint adds lightness to dishes with its clean, fragrant taste.



Lamb Manti with Garlic Yogurt and Spiced Butter

Manti are little pasta parcels stuffed with spiced meat. Substitute with beef, if you prefer.

Hands-on time: 1hr
10min, plus resting.
Cooking time: 8min.
Serves 4-6

FOR THE MANTI
200g '00' pasta flour, plus extra to dust
2 eggs, lightly beaten
300g lamb mince
1 small onion, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, crushed

1½ tsp ground cumin
1 tsp garam masala
½ tsp dried chilli flakes
FOR THE YOGURT DRESSING
250g Greek-style yogurt
1 garlic clove, crushed
Juice 1 lemon
Handful mint leaves, finely shredded

FOR THE SPICED BUTTER

100g butter
2 tsp Aleppo pepper (or use dried red pepper flakes, not the same as chilli flakes)
1 tsp sweet smoked paprika

1. In a food processor, pulse the flour with the eggs until the mixture looks like large breadcrumbs. The dough should come together when squeezed, but not be sticky. Turn out on to a work surface, bring together and knead briefly to make a smooth, fairly firm dough. Wrap in cling film and chill for 30min.
2. Meanwhile, make the filling. In a bowl, thoroughly mix the lamb, onion, garlic and spices with 1 tsp salt and 1 tsp water. Cover and chill until needed.

3. Divide dough equally in ½. Working with 1 piece at a time (keeping rest tightly wrapped), dust work surface lightly with flour and roll out dough with a rolling pin or pasta machine into a long rectangular sheet about 2mm thick. Use a pizza cutter or knife to trim the edges neatly, then cut into 6cm squares. Put aside, cover with a damp tea towel and repeat with the remaining dough (you should get about 48 squares).

4. Place 1 tsp of filling in the centre of a dough square, then lightly wet edges of the dough with a damp finger. Pinch 2 opposite corners together to seal in the middle, then repeat with the other 2 opposite corners to give a pyramid shape. Pinch all the edges tightly to seal. Put on a large baking sheet lined with baking parchment and cover with a tea towel. Repeat until all the filling is used up.
5. Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil. Add dumplings, reduce heat to medium-high and simmer for 7-8min, until tender and cooked through.
6. While the manti are cooking, make the dressings. Whisk the yogurt, garlic and lemon juice in a bowl with a pinch of salt. In a small pan, melt the butter. When it's starting to bubble, add the Aleppo pepper, smoked paprika and some seasoning and cook, stirring, for 2min. Remove from heat.
7. Spoon ½ the yogurt dressing on to serving plates. Drain manti well, then divide between plates. Drizzle over remaining yogurt dressing followed by the spiced butter and shredded mint. Serve.



Gochujang Sticky Cod with Cucumber, Edamame, Apple and Mint Salad

We're addicted to this zingy salad. It's great on its own for lunch, or as a side for something spicy. This sticky gochujang glaze is also delicious with salmon, or brush it over chicken before griddling or air frying.

Hands-on time: 20min.
Cooking time: 15min.
Serves 4

FOR THE COD
1tbsp gochujang
1tbsp runny honey
1tbsp soy sauce
1tbsp toasted sesame oil
4 skinless cod fillets, about 120g each
1tbsp sesame seeds
2 spring onions, finely sliced

FOR THE SALAD
200g frozen podded edamame
Small handful mint leaves
5cm piece fresh root ginger, peeled and finely grated
3tbsp toasted sesame oil

1tbsp cider vinegar
1tsp runny honey
½tsp Dijon mustard
1 small or ½ large cucumber, about 250g
1 medium Granny Smith apple, cored
2tbsp pumpkin seeds
1tbsp sesame seeds

1. Preheat oven to 200°C (180°C fan) mark 6 and line a baking tray with baking parchment. In a large bowl, using a fork, whisk the gochujang, honey, soy, sesame oil and some seasoning. Add the cod fillets and gently turn to coat. Transfer cod to the lined

tray and spoon or brush over any remaining glaze. Sprinkle over the sesame seeds and cook in oven for 15min, until just cooked through.
2. Meanwhile, make the salad. Cook the edamame in a pan of salted boiling water for 5min, until tender. Drain and rinse under cold water to cool. Tip into a large bowl.
3. In the small bowl of a food processor, or in a small blender, whizz the mint, ginger, sesame oil, vinegar, honey, mustard and plenty of seasoning until smooth.

4. Halve the cucumber lengthways. Scrape out and discard the seedy core. Cut cucumber and apple into fine matchsticks. Add to the edamame bowl along with the mint dressing and pumpkin and sesame seeds. Gently toss to coat. Divide salad and cod between 4 plates, sprinkle over the spring onions and serve with sticky rice, if you like.

AIR FRYER COOKING
Preheat air fryer to 180°C. Cook the gochujang-coated cod for 15min, or until cooked through. Complete recipe to serve. ➔

Zingy Citrus Chicken

Despite its few ingredients, this succulent Greek-inspired chicken dish is packed with flavour and would be brilliant cooked on a barbecue – but the oven works just as well.

Hands-on time: 15min.
Cooking time: about 40min. Serves 4

2 limes
75g full-fat Greek yogurt
4 garlic cloves, crushed
4 sprigs oregano, leaves picked
12 skinless and boneless chicken thigh fillets, about 90g
50g pitted mixed olives, roughly halved

1. Finely grate the zest of 1 lime into a large, non-metallic bowl and squeeze in the juice. Stir in the yogurt, garlic and plenty of seasoning. Finely chop most of the oregano and stir into the yogurt mixture. Next, add the chicken and stir to coat. Cover and chill to marinate for at least 30min (up to 24hr).
2. When ready to serve, preheat grill to high. Put a large rack in a large foil-lined roasting tin and arrange the chicken in a single layer on the rack (in batches if needed), making sure the fillets are opened out flat.
3. Grill the chicken for about 6-8min on each side, until golden and cooked through. Transfer to a serving dish, scatter over the olives and tear over the remaining oregano leaves. Serve with the remaining lime, cut into wedges for squeezing over, and a crisp salad.



OREGANO

Its leaves may be small, but oregano is a powerhouse of a herb, delivering a punchy flavour when used fresh.



Baked Greek Salad

We've turned Greek salad on its head. Pan-fried saganaki cheese adds wonderful texture and moreish flavour – if you can't get hold of it, use halloumi instead.

Hands-on time: 15min.
Cooking time: about 40min. Serves 4

500g cherry tomatoes on the vine
75g (3oz) pitted Kalamata olives
1 red onion, cut into thin wedges
2 peppers, deseeded and sliced
2 courgettes, sliced
3tbsp extra virgin olive oil
Small bunch fresh oregano, leaves picked
150g (5oz) couscous
1½tbsp red wine vinegar
200g pack Greek frying cheese (we used Odysea Greek Saganaki Kefalotyri Cheese), cut into triangles

1. Preheat oven to 200°C (180°C fan) mark 6. In a large roasting tin, mix

tomatoes, olives, onion, peppers and courgettes with 2tbsp oil, half the oregano and seasoning. Spread out in a single layer and roast in the oven for about 30min, until tender.

2. Scatter couscous and pour 250ml boiling water (or vegetable stock) into tin; cover tightly with foil and cook for 10min more. Remove tin from oven and fluff up couscous with a fork. Stir in vinegar.
3. Meanwhile, heat remaining oil in a frying

pan over high heat. Add cheese and fry for 30sec on each side, until golden. Serve salad topped with cheese and sprinkled with remaining oregano. ➔



TARRAGON

This distinctive herb is a cornerstone of French cookery, famed for its intense aniseedy flavour.



Pistachio Pesto New Potatoes

This punchy pesto, made with peppery watercress and fragrant tarragon, is great with pasta but also as a dressing for potatoes.

Hands-on time: 15min.
Cooking time: 20min.
Serves 8

1½kg new potatoes, preferably Jersey Royals, large ones halved

75g pistachio kernels

1 large garlic clove, finely chopped

75g Parmesan or vegetarian Italian-style hard cheese, grated

150g watercress, woody stalks removed, plus extra leaves to garnish

10g fresh tarragon, leaves only
200ml good-quality olive oil

1. Preheat oven to 200°C (180°C fan) mark 6. Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil. Add the potatoes and simmer for about 20min, until completely tender. Drain well and set aside.
2. Meanwhile, spread out the pistachios in a roasting tin and bake in the oven for 3-5min or until toasted. Remove to a bowl to cool for a few min.
3. Put the pistachios in a food processor with the garlic, cheese, watercress, tarragon and olive oil. Season generously. Pulse to a chunky pesto, adding 3-4tbsp water if needed to loosen to a sauce-like consistency.
4. Toss the potatoes with half the pesto and transfer to a warm serving dish. Serve with remaining pesto on the side, to spoon over.

GET AHEAD Make the pesto up to a few hours ahead, cover and store in a cool place.

Roast Chicken with Orzo

Make sure to buy a free-range bird here – you'll be rewarded with better flavour in the meat as well as the pasta, as it absorbs the juices.

Hands-on time: 30min, plus resting. **Cooking time:** about 1½hr. **Serves** 6

2tbsp olive oil

1 medium whole chicken, about 1.7kg

2 carrots, cut into 1.5cm pieces

1 leek, finely sliced

2 celery sticks, sliced

100g pancetta lardons

1 lemon, cut into 6 wedges

1 tarragon sprig, plus extra leaves, chopped, to garnish

500-700ml hot chicken stock

300g orzo pasta

1. Preheat oven to 190°C (170°C fan) mark 5. Heat oil over medium-high heat in a casserole (with a lid) that will hold the chicken with space around it. Untruss chicken and brown in the casserole, breast-side down, until breast is golden. Remove chicken to a board.

2. Add carrots, leek, celery and pancetta to the dish and cook for 5min, until beginning to brown. Stir in lemon wedges, tarragon sprig and plenty of seasoning. Return chicken to the casserole dish, breast-side up. Pour in enough stock to come halfway up the sides of the chicken. Bring to the boil.
3. Cover with the lid and cook in the oven for 50min. Carefully remove lid, scatter the orzo around the chicken, making sure the orzo is submerged in the stock, re-cover with the lid and return to the oven for 20min. Check the chicken is cooked; a meat thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast should read 72°C or higher.
4. Carefully transfer the casserole dish to a board and leave to rest for 10min. Scatter over chopped tarragon leaves and serve. ⇨



THYME

From the same family as oregano and mint, thyme has a sweet earthiness. Look out for lemon thyme for an additional citrusy note.



Slow Cooker Apricot and Thyme Pork Chops

This light and fragrant slow-cooker pork dish with seasonal British fruit is the perfect way to celebrate the flavours of summer.

Hands-on time: 10min.
Cooking time: 6hr 15min. Serves 4

- 150g apricots, halved and destoned
- 500g baby new potatoes, halved
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- ½ red onion, sliced
- Small handful fresh thyme, leaves picked
- 2tsp olive oil
- 4 bone-in pork chops, about 1kg total
- 1tbsp apricot jam
- 200ml hot chicken stock
- 200g full-fat crème fraîche
- 1tsp runny honey
- 1tbsp cornflour

1. Put the apricots, potatoes, garlic, onion, thyme leaves and plenty of seasoning into the bowl of the slow cooker and mix well.

2. Grease a large griddle pan with oil and put over high heat. Brush pork on both sides with the apricot jam. When the pan is smoking hot, add the pork chops (in batches if needed) and cook for 1min per side, until striped with dark

bar marks. Transfer to the bowl of the slow cooker and season. 3. Whisk together the stock, crème fraîche and honey and add to the pork. Cover with the lid and cook on low for 6hr or until the pork and potatoes are cooked through and tender. 4. Remove pork to a board and discard

the bones (if necessary). Strain sauce into a medium pan and return the potato/onion mixture and pork steaks to the slow cooker bowl (with cooker still on); cover with the lid to keep warm. 5. In a small bowl, mix the cornflour with 1tbsp

of the strained sauce to make a smooth paste. Whisk cornflour mix into the pan and bubble over high heat, stirring continuously, until thickened. 6. Divide pork and potatoes between 4 bowls or plates, top with the sauce and serve with greens on the side, if you like.



Little Lemon and Thyme Loaves

A bit like lemon drizzle cake, but the courgette and thyme give these even more character. We used a 12-hole, loose-based mini loaf tin.

Hands-on time: 30min, plus cooling. **Cooking time:** about 30min. **Makes 12 mini cakes**

FOR THE CAKES

- 150ml sunflower oil, plus extra to grease
- 175g caster sugar
- 2 medium eggs
- 200g self-raising flour
- ½tsp bicarbonate of soda
- Finely grated zest of 2 lemons
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 175g courgettes, coarsely grated (skin on)

1tbsp chopped lemon thyme leaves

Lemon thyme sprigs, to garnish

FOR THE ICING

- 225g icing sugar
- 3tbsp lemon juice

1. Preheat oven to 180°C (160°C fan) mark 4. Lightly grease the 12 mini loaf holes. Alternatively, line 12 holes of a muffin tin with paper cases. 2. In a freestanding mixer

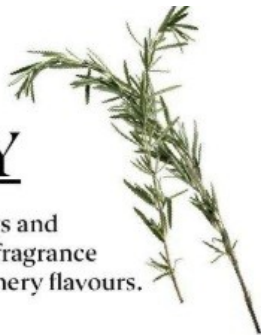
or large bowl, using a handheld electric whisk, beat the oil, caster sugar and eggs for a couple of minutes. Using a large metal spoon, fold in the flour, bicarbonate of soda, lemon zest and juice, courgettes and lemon thyme. 3. Divide cake batter among the holes/cases and bake in the oven for 25-30min or until lightly golden and a skewer inserted into the centre of

a cake comes out clean. Cool in tin on a wire rack. 4. When cakes are cool, make the icing. Sift the icing sugar into a medium bowl and mix in the lemon juice. Remove cooled cakes from tin and top with the icing. Garnish with sprigs of lemon thyme.

TO STORE Keep iced cakes in a single layer in an airtight container for up to 3 days. ➡

ROSEMARY

It's often used in winter roasts and stews, but rosemary's heady fragrance works equally well with summery flavours.



Lentil, Aubergine and Walnut Ragu

This veggie ragu has such a depth of flavour, you won't miss the meat at all.

Hands-on time: 15min.
Cooking time: 45min.
Serves 4

- 2tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 large carrot, finely chopped
- 1 large celery stick, finely chopped
- 1 aubergine (about 275g), trimmed and cut into 1cm cubes
- 2 smoked garlic cloves, finely sliced
- 1tbsp finely chopped rosemary
- 2tbsp tomato purée
- 175ml red wine
- 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 250ml vegetable stock
- 1tsp runny honey
- 75g walnuts
- 250g pouch cooked Puy lentils, we used Merchant Gourmet
- 360g pappardelle
- 50g Parmesan, finely grated, see GH tip

1. Heat the oil in a large, deep frying pan or casserole and fry the onions, carrots and celery for 10min, until soft.
2. Add aubergine to the pan and continue to cook for 6-8min, until soft. Add the garlic, rosemary and tomato purée and continue to cook for a further 2min.
3. Pour in the red wine and bubble for 2min, then add the tinned tomatoes, stock and honey. Simmer gently for 10min, until slightly reduced.
4. Meanwhile, heat a frying pan over medium heat and dry-fry the walnuts for 3-4min until toasted. Remove from the pan and finely chop.
5. Add the lentils and ½ of the chopped walnuts to the sauce and cook for another 8-10min. Check seasoning.
6. Meanwhile, cook pappardelle in a large pan of boiling, salted water for 10-12min, until al dente. Drain and return to the pan. Toss a ladleful of the ragu through the pasta to coat, then divide between 4 bowls and top with the remaining ragu.
7. Scatter the remaining walnuts and Parmesan over the pasta to serve.

GH tip

If cooking for vegetarians, swap the Parmesan for Italian-style vegetarian hard cheese.

Baked Brie with Honey Rosemary Plums

This oozy baked cheese is great for sharing. Goat's cheese or Camembert, or roasted grapes, would work nicely here, too.

Hands-on time: 10min.
Cooking time: 45min.
Serves 6

- 125g block puff pastry
- 200g whole round Brie
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1tsp polenta
- 2tbsp finely grated pecorino
- 250g plums, destoned and cut into thick slices
- Small handful rosemary, leaves picked
- 2tbsp runny honey

1. Roll out the puff pastry to a rough 18cm square, about 3mm thick. Put the Brie in the centre and fold the pastry corners over into the centre to enclose the Brie. Transfer to a lined baking tray.
2. Lightly brush pastry with egg and sprinkle with the polenta and pecorino. Chill for 30min.
3. Preheat oven to 200°C (180°C fan) mark 6. Cook pie for 45min, until golden.
4. In a small-medium roasting tin, mix plums, rosemary and honey. Add to oven with the pie for the final 20min of cooking time. Spoon plums and any juices from the tin over the pie and serve in slices.



Kitchen garden



LEMON VERBENA

This versatile herb is full of sweet, citrusy flavour.

Lemon Curd

Lemon verbena adds a subtle floral scent and taste to a zesty pot of lemon curd. If it's hard to find, you could replace the herb with mint.

Hands-on time: 15min.
Cooking time: 30min.
Makes 700g (2 x 350ml jars)

- Grated zest and juice of 4 lemons
- 15g lemon verbena, chopped
- 125g butter, cubed
- 350g caster sugar
- 4 medium eggs, beaten

1. Set a heatproof bowl over a pan of simmering water and add lemon

- zest, lemon juice, lemon verbena and butter to the bowl. Gently stir as butter melts.
2. When butter is just about melted, add sugar and stir the mixture until the sugar has dissolved.
3. Stir in beaten eggs and continue to heat gently. Do not boil mixture or it will curdle. Cook for 20min, until thick enough to coat the back of a wooden spoon and hold its shape when a line is drawn through.
4. Take off heat and strain through a fine sieve, pushing through with a wooden spoon. Pot hot curd immediately into hot, sterilised jars and cover. Store in fridge and use within 2 weeks. ■