

Cool season herbs

Herbs grow well in North Texas even for inexperienced gardeners. Using the herbs you have grown to enhance the taste of food without adding calories offers positive benefits for the entire family. Herbs that grow in cool weather include:

- Cilantro
- Parsley
- Dill
- Fennel
- Lemon balm



Get started growing

The cool growing season begins in October and continues until April, and sometimes May, in North Texas. Herbs such as dill and cilantro can be sown from seed. However, to improve your chances of successful gardening, other cool-season herbs are better started from transplants.

Select a site that provides at least 6 hours of full sun. Although herbs require little soil amendment after they begin growing, they do want soil that drains well. Break up the soil in your herb bed and mix in organic material to provide nutrition for the plants and improve drainage. Many North Texas gardeners find that raised beds with improved soil works best. Make sure that your site has access to water during dry spells.

Planting and harvesting

When planting herbs from seed, follow the instructions on the seed packet for the correct planting depth. Mix a small amount of balanced fertilizer with the soil and add seeds. Pat the soil around the seeds to ensure good contact with the soil and water.

For transplanting herbs, dig a hole as deep as the plant in its container. Mix a small amount of balanced fertilizer into the soil and then gently put in the hole. Pat the soil around the base of the herb plant. If the soil is dry, add water.

In cool weather the soil does not dry-out quickly; however, if the soil dries out from lack of rain, add water to the equivalent of 1-inch per week. Pests are rarely a problem with cool-season herbs.

Begin harvesting an herb when the plant has enough foliage to maintain growth. Up to 75% of the current season's growth can be harvested at one time (NCSU Extension Service).

As the weather turns from warm to hot, your herb plant will bolt and begin preparing seeds. You may choose to harvest the seeds from the cilantro and dill plants to use in cooking. The seeds of the cilantro plant are called coriander.

Although most cool-season herbs are frost tolerant, you need to provide protective cover when the temperatures dip below 28° F.

Growing herbs in a container

Herbs can also be grown in containers and many cooks like to keep an herb collection growing near the door for easy access when preparing a meal. To grow herbs in a container:

- Select a container with a drain hole to keep roots from setting in water and has the depth and width sufficient for plant roots to spread.
- Choose a good potting mix or supplement soil with 50% composted organic matter.
- Group plants by their need for sun and water.
- Check soil moisture and add water if dry. Container soil dries out more quickly than garden soil.

- Fertilize early if the potting mix does not have added fertilizer and then monthly during the growing season.

Using cool-weather herbs

Fresh herbs are preferred by chefs for warm and cool dishes. If you are not sure how much of an herb to use, begin with a small amount and add more to your taste preferences.

Harvest herbs mid-morning and wash thoroughly. Wrap in damp paper towels and store in refrigerator until ready to use.

To prepare herbs, remove leaves from stems. Wash thoroughly and pat dry. For herbs on woody stems, grab the top of the stem with one hand and with the other hand move down the stem opposite the direction of growth to remove leaves. Soft-stemmed herbs can be removed from individually from stem or by pulling in the direction of growth.

Cool-season herbs are delicate and will lose flavor quickly when cooked. Therefore, it is best to add them at the end of cooking. Cool-season herbs may also be eaten fresh. Chop or mince the herbs before using to release their flavor. Here are a few common uses for cool season herbs:

- Cilantro – topping for tacos and taco salad or added to guacamole. Cilantro is a popular ingredient in Chinese and Thai cooking.
- Parsley may be added to flavor soups and cooked vegetables or served fresh. A mixture of chopped parsley and garlic adds flavor to grilled steak, fish or chicken. A combination of herbs including parsley add taste and texture to homemade salad dressings.
- Dill is often used to season cooked vegetables, in salad dressing and mixed with yogurt and lemon for flavorful sauce for fish or chicken.
- Fennel can be used in place of or in addition to dill. However, not everyone likes the licorice or anise-like flavor of fennel.
- Lemon balm is often steeped in hot water with tea leaves or added to the preparation of iced tea. To use the leaves, bruise them with a spoon while stirring to release their flavor. A bit of chopped lemon balm complements many fruits, including honeydew, cantaloupe, pineapple, apples and pears.

Preserving herbs

Although fresh herbs are preferred, herbs can be preserved for later use by mixing with oil or butter, freezing in water or drying.

To preserve herbs in water, chop herbs and place in an ice-cube tray. Fill tray with water and freeze. Then remove cubes and place in labeled bags or containers and keep in freezer until needed.

To save in oil, place herbs in a food processor with 1/3 cup of oil for every 2 cups of leaves – or ½ cup unsalted butter per 2 to 4 tablespoons of leaves. For butters, add small amounts of citrus rind, ginger or garlic for extra flavor. Herb butters and oils can be stored safely in the refrigerator for 4 days, according to the Colorado Extension Service*.

Herbs may be dried in a dehydrator, a low-temperature oven (about 95 degrees F) or microwave. Do not sun-dry herbs in North Texas because of the high humidity. Separate leaves before drying.

Herbs dry out quickly when heated, so monitor closely and remove from heat when the herb leaf crumbles when touched.



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