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# Herbs for Montana Gardens

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This MontGuide focuses on edible herbaceous plants that complement and flavor our food and beverages. Each herb has its own cultural requirements, and many will grow in Montana, although not equally well in all parts of the state. This list is illustrative and not exhaustive, there are many herbs from which to choose.

YARD AND GARDEN

MT200003AG Revised 10/19

## IN THE CULINARY WORLD, THE WORD “HERBS”

refers to leaves of plants, fresh or dried, that are used to impart a specific flavor or seasoning to food. “Herbs” actually means different things in different contexts: botanically, the term “herbs” refers to any plants that do not form wood during their typically perennial lifecycle (technically, they are called “herbaceous” plants). Some “herbs” are used for medicinal purposes. Others are used for their valuable dyes, and some have spiritual or ceremonial applications.

## ANISE

*Pimpinella anisum*

Anise is an annual plant that grows up to two feet tall, with leaves and seeds that have a sweet licorice taste. The seeds are used to flavor cakes and cookies and the leaves can be used in salads.

Plant anise seeds in pots in early spring, keeping the seeds and seedlings at a temperature of at least 70°F. Set the plants outdoors in well-drained soil and full sun after danger of frost. Anise transplants poorly, so disturb the root system as little as possible. Do not over fertilize.

Cut and use some of the leaves as soon as the plant is large enough. The plant will bloom by midsummer, and by fall you should find several seed clusters, each containing 6 to 10 seeds. Harvest the gray-brown seeds from the fully-ripened seedheads before they shatter. Spread them on a sheet of paper to dry in the sun. Store in an airtight container.



## ARUGULA ▲

*Eruca vesicaria* subsp. *Sativa*

This popular annual has been grown in the Mediterranean area for centuries and was an especially popular salad green. It is found throughout the Mediterranean region and has become naturalized in areas of North America. It was grown in American gardens before 1850.

Sow seed in spring into moist, fertile soil in full sun or partial shade. Growing plants in cool, moist, fertile soil will yield more tender leaves, while plants grown in dry, hot, less fertile soils produce more pungent leaves. The plant will often self-sow and may become invasive.

The leaves are used in salads. They are also added to stir fries, sauces, and soups. The flowers and flower buds provide a peppery zip to salads. Harvest the leaves before appearance of the flower stalk. Flowers and flower buds are harvested as needed.



## **BASIL ▲**

### *Ocimum basilicum*

This is the most widely grown of many species of basil, used for centuries in medicine and to flavor soups and stews. It is grown as an annual and will reach a height of about 18 inches.

Basil is native to India. It was first cultivated in Britain in 1548 and reached the U.S. before 1806.

The species is highly variable in color and fragrance. The delicately scented cultivar ‘Dark Opal’ has purplish-black leaves, while the green-leaved ‘Genovese’ is considered best for flavoring tomato and garlic dishes. ‘Horapha,’ ‘Glycyrrhiza,’ and ‘Thai,’ frequently used in Southeast Asian dishes, have purple-tinted leaves and a sweet licorice aroma. ‘Napoletano’ is a favorite for pesto dishes, while ‘New Guinea’ has purple-tinted leaves with a strong cinnamon/licorice flavor. ‘Green Bouquet’ has a sweet, fine fragrance.

Start seeds in early spring, and set the plants in the garden, about a foot apart, after danger of frost. Basil does best in full sun in rich, light, well-drained soil that is at least 55°F. Pinch the growing tips a few times to promote branching and stockiness in the plants. Locate plantings in a warm spot, as basil performs poorly in cool, damp areas.

Harvest the plant just before flowering by cutting the main stem down to the bottom or second node. The remaining growth will branch and provide another cutting in a few weeks if your season is long enough. Pinch the leaves from the stems and dry what you cannot use fresh in a shady, ventilated area. If leaves are not dried within three days, finish the process in a warm oven or gentle dehydrator. Finish harvesting before the first frost.

## **BEE BALM**

### *Monarda didyma*

Also called bergamot and Oswego tea. The herb was grown to a considerable extent in Oswego County, New York, by the Shakers in the late 1700s. The entire plant emits a strong citrus-like scent. This is a perennial that grows up to four feet in height with red, white or lavender flowers. Starting from seeds may be unsatisfactory, so try to find a plant or start your own from crown division of a neighbor’s plants. Plant in full sun in fertile soil high in organic matter. A top dressing of compost in early spring and an organic mulch in summer will help keep them healthy. The plants spread rampantly, so divide them every few years, replanting only the younger, outer roots about 2 feet apart and discarding the old, inner ones. Support the tall stems in windy areas. To keep the planting healthy, cut the stems to within an inch of the ground as soon as the bottom leaves have begun to turn yellow. Strip the leaves from the stems and dry them in a shady spot within 2 to 3 days. A longer drying period reduces the quality of the final product.

## **CATNIP**

### *Nepeta cataria*

Catnip was cultivated in the old Roman town of Nepeti, from which the genus name derives. The early colonists brought this herb to America, and by 1796 it was being grown as a commercial crop. It has now escaped from cultivation and can be found growing wild near abandoned homesteads. The plant is a perennial in the mint family, hardy to zone 3, and may reach heights of 18 to 30 inches.

Transplant seedlings in full sun to light shade and in well-drained soils, spacing the plants about 12 inches apart. Harvest the young leaves and flowers when they are fully opened, before they brown. Dry them rapidly in a shady spot.

Note that the plants may spread rapidly in the garden – if the cats don’t graze it to the ground – it will have to be thinned or kept contained with edging material.

## **CARAWAY**

### *Carum carvi*

This biennial is started from seed. Plant in the garden about one inch deep in early spring. Thin the seedlings to stand about a foot apart in the row. Caraway does not tolerate transplanting well. The first year, the plant will produce a bushy top. It will overwinter, and the seeds will mature from mid-to-late summer of the second year, so plant some each year to keep a steady supply. Cut the

seed heads from the plant as soon as they turn brown. Leaving them too long will allow them to shatter. Tumble or gently thresh the seeds from the seed heads and dry them in the hot sun. Store the seeds in a paper bag or closed container.

The roots of caraway, as well as the seeds, are a delicacy, prepared and eaten as you would carrots. The leaves also can be chopped up and used to flavor stews and soups.

## CHICORY

### *Cichorium intybus*

Chicory is started from seed or transplants after the soil temperature warms to 65°F.

This perennial is used as a salad crop and a root crop. The dried roots are ground and used as an additive to coffee. This plant needs approximately 120 frost-free days and should only be grown in the warmer areas of the state.

In fall, after frosts but before the ground freezes, dig out entire roots and cut the tops off about two inches above the roots. Store the roots in a cool, moist cellar or in pits. After this short, cool period you can force the roots by moving them into a dark place with a temperature of 50° to 60°F and covering them with damp sand. Keep the media moist and harvest the pale yellow or white shoots when they are about 3 inches long.

## CHIVES ▼

### *Allium schoenoprasum*

This perennial is a member of the onion family that grows up to 10 inches high and produces edible violet-colored flowers.

Chives are perennial and hardy to zone 3. Purchase transplants or start from seeds. Grow them outdoors or as house plants. Outdoors they should be thinned every three to five years by dividing the clumps of bulbs in the fall after the tops have died back, or in the early spring before growth resumes. Cut and use the tender leaves or the entire plant any time. The chopped leaves lend their delicate onion flavor to many foods. Chives self-sow and may become invasive.



## CORIANDER (CILANTRO)

### *Coriandrum sativum*

Coriander is an erect annual, about 20 inches in height with finely divided, pungent leaves. It is native to the eastern Mediterranean but has become naturalized over much of North America. The roots are used in Thai cooking, and the leaves are used to flavor soups, salads, and curries. The seeds are used in curries, pickling, sausages, sauces, and Greek cuisine.

Preferably, seeds should be sown directly to the garden – but with short Montana seasons, sow seeds in pots and transplant outdoors in spring into well-drained, fertile soils in full sun. Plants grown for their foliage will tolerate partial shade. Crowding or low soil moisture encourages bolting.

Gather fresh young leaves as you would parsley. Harvest the seeds when the fruit are ripe and partially dried.

## DILL ▼

### *Anethum graveolens*



Native to the Mediterranean and southern Russia, this plant derives its common name from the Norse “dilla,” which means “to lull,” as it was once used to induce sleep.

Grow this annual by planting seeds in full sun in early spring. The delicate seedlings do not transplant well. Protect the tall plants from strong winds. Harvest the seeds as soon as they begin to shatter but are still mostly green. Snip off the heads and spread them on a tray to dry in the sun for a few days. If you want an especially early crop, plant the seeds in late fall or use transplants in the early spring. Dill will self-seed. To help contain shedding seeds, place bags made of old nylon stockings or similar material around the ripening seed heads as the flowers fade.

## ENDIVE

*Cichorium endivia*

This is a green that in the curled-leaf form is called endive and in the broad, flat leafed form is called escarole. It adds a unique flavor to salads, and the escarole form is sometimes used in cooking. Production of the chemicals causing endive's natural bitterness can be prevented by restricting sunlight to the heart of the plant, called blanching. Do this by tying together the outermost leaves up over the top of the plant for 1 to 2 weeks. Otherwise, grow it as you would lettuce.

## FENNEL ▼

*Foeniculum vulgare*



There are several kinds of fennel. *Foeniculum vulgare* has feathery foliage and is not easily transplanted. It is an annual, sometimes a biennial, that grows up to four feet tall. The leaves have an anise-like flavor, and the blanched stems are eaten like celery. Plant seeds outdoors or in pots early in spring.

*F. vulgare* var. *dulce* is called Florence fennel or finocchio and has enlarged leaf bases that are eaten chopped in salads or in soups.

## GERANIUMS, SCENTED

*Pelargonium* spp.

The various species of scented geraniums are used for flavoring foods. Grow these in pots as you would regular geraniums. Rose geraniums, *P. graveolens*, are grown commercially for their fragrant oil. The leaves give a rose flavor to desserts and jellies. The leaves can be cut from mature plants at any time and used fresh. Peppermint geraniums, *P. tomentosum*, have leaves that are gray-green, velvety, and smell like peppermint. They impart their

peppermint flavor to jellies and desserts. For the real connoisseur, there are other geranium flavors. Scented geraniums are usually purchased as plants.

## HORSERADISH ▼

*Armoracia rusticana*



This perennial is started by crown division or root cuttings. It needs deep, loose, fertile soil and can survive in the wild for long periods with no care. Harvest in October or early November by removing the tops and digging the roots. Save small roots (at least as large as a lead pencil) to plant back the next spring. Store these in sand in a basement or in deep pits outdoors, keeping them moist and cool, but not freezing. Larger roots, for use, should be trimmed of small side roots and stored as described above or cleaned and grated immediately. Clean by scraping and washing the soil from them. Grate the root (or use a food processor) directly into 5% strength white (distilled) vinegar. Bottle and tightly cap and keep refrigerated. Also, the roots may be dried, ground into powder and stored in bottles for later mixing with vinegar. Do all grating outside with good air circulation, as grating horseradish is more irritating to eyes and noses than chopping onions.

## LEMON BALM

*Melissa officinalis*

This hardy perennial grows throughout Europe and central Asia and has been cultivated in Italy and Greece for over two millennia. The lemon-scented plant is most commonly used in herbal teas for its soothing, relaxing effect.

Sow seeds directly to the garden in autumn or when soil has warmed in spring. Plants may also be propagated by division or stem cuttings in spring. Plants do well in moist soil with full or partial sun. Cut plants as flowering begins and use the fresh leaves to impart a lemon accent to salads, soups, fish and game dinners, or dry leaves for tea.

## LOVAGE

*Levisticum officinale*

Native to the Mediterranean, lovage was formerly used in medicine and in cooking.

A large perennial, hardy to zone 3, lovage grows up to four feet tall and produces leaves that are used fresh or dried to flavor soups, vegetables and salads. The bases of lovage stems are blanched and eaten and taste very much like celery. Start plants from seeds, and grow them in pots indoors, transplanting to the garden when danger of frost has passed. Set the seedlings about 24 inches apart in full sun or partial shade and in moist, fertile, well-drained soils. Harvest the seeds just before the seedheads shatter. Store dried leaves and stems in closed containers.

## MINT ▼

*Mentha* spp. (flat, veined leaves, shown with parsley, which has deeply-notched, curly leaves.)



There are many species of mint. Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) is used at home to flavor tea and other beverages, while peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*) is commonly used in medicines and confections. Both are grown commercially as oil crops and used in candy, chewing gum and flavored toothpicks.

Many mint rootstocks can carry pests. Avoid the introduction of these into the garden by buying inspected and certified pest-free plants from a reputable firm.

No special care is necessary for mint production. Give ample water and keep weeds out. Grow spearmint and peppermint outdoors in full sun or partial shade in a rich, well-drained soil, or in pots indoors or out. Propagation is usually done by clump division. Use leaves fresh, or dry for storage.

In fall after a frost, cut the plants to the ground and mulch them for winter. Remove the mulch as spring growth begins.

All mint species can become invasive.

## NASTURTIUM

*Nasturtium* spp.

This plant, including leaves, flowers and stems, has a peppery-spicy flavor and can be eaten out of hand or used in salads. The green seed pods are pickled and used in sauces. Nasturtium is well-known for its ease of growing in full sun and almost any soil type, although too much fertility will result in much foliage and few flowers. Grow in your garden from seeds or transplants and keep them watered and weeded.

## OREGANO ▼

*Origanum vulgare*



There are many species of oregano, but *O. vulgare* is the most popular for Italian, Greek, and Mexican cooking.

Oregano is a hardy, rhizomatous perennial native to Europe that reaches a height of about 20 inches. The leaves are usually dried and used to enhance strong-flavored dishes that often contain garlic, red wine, tomatoes, chili or onions.

Sow seeds in place in autumn, or in spring when soil temperatures have reached 55°F. Plants also can be propagated by division in spring. Soil should be well-drained with neutral to slightly alkaline pH. Because the plant is a perennial some winter protection is recommended, especially for plants on a south or west exposure or near a highly reflective background. Harvest leaves throughout the growing season and use fresh or dry them before use. Oregano can become invasive.

## PARSLEY

*Petroselinum crispum* (see mint photo, left)

This biennial plant, not winter hardy in much of Montana, grows easily in pots indoors or in the garden. Grow it in fertile soil in full sun or partial shade by sowing the seeds outside in early spring, thinning the plants to stand about 3 inches apart. Parsley is used to

flavor soup, meats and eggs and as a garnish on salads and other dishes. Oil extracted from the plant is used in medicine. The leaves are a good source of Vitamin C and can be used fresh or dried. Cut the leaves as needed, and finish harvesting the plant before frost.

## **ROSEMARY ▼**

*Rosmarinus officinalis*



Rosemary is a perennial evergreen shrub with small, narrow leaves that are used as a flavoring and scenting agent. The germination rate for rosemary seeds is low, but you can try starting seeds in late winter inside. Otherwise, start with plants or rooted cuttings and grow in pots. The plant is not hardy to much of Montana, so bring indoors in the fall. The plant reaches three feet in height; prune it back as needed. Use fresh, or strip and dry the leaves and store them in a closed container.

Use fresh or dried leaves sparingly for special accents with cream soups made of leafy greens, poultry, stews, and sauces. Mix chopped (fresh or dried) rosemary, parsley, sage, and butter and spread under the skin to season chickens and turkeys for roasting.

## **SAGE ▼**

*Salvia officinalis*



There are many sage species. The species commonly used in kitchens is *Salvia officinalis* – garden sage. This perennial herb, marginally hardy in parts of our state but quite hardy in others, grows up to about two feet in height.

Start the plants from seeds, stem cuttings or crown divisions. One or two plants in the corner of the garden or in pots in the house produce enough for most families. If you are planting them in the garden, set the plants about 2 feet apart in well-drained soil and full sun. You can prune up to six to eight inches of growth from the top of large plants each year. Harvest the leaves before the plant blooms. Dry tops or leaves in the shade or use fresh. If there is dirt or dust on leaves, wash them before drying. Pack and store dried leaves in airtight bags or other containers. Sage is used to flavor many meats, stuffing, cottage and cream cheeses. Steep the dried leaves to make tea.

## **SUMMER SAVORY**

*Satureja hortensis*

This is an annual that grows 18 inches tall and has bronzy-green pungent, spicy leaves used to flavor meat, fowl, green salads and egg dishes. Grow it only from fresh seed, since seed viability decreases substantially after the first year. Sow the seeds directly in the garden in full sun, and thin them to stand about 10 inches apart. It is sweeter than winter savory (*S. montana*) and easier to grow. You may also grow it indoors and cut the leafy tops. Hang them in an airy, shaded place to dry.

## **WINTER SAVORY**

*Satureja montana*

This is a perennial hardy to about zone 5, so it needs winter protection in much of Montana if you choose to grow it outdoors; it can also be grown indoors. The plant is woody and grows up to two feet tall. It is used in the same recipes as summer savory, as well as a flavoring for some liqueurs. Pick the leaves any time and dry them for winter use.

## **TARRAGON**

*Artemisia dracunculus*

A perennial anise-scented herb, tarragon produces oil used in flavoring foods and vinegars. Start plants by root or crown divisions and harvest the leaves throughout the growing season. The plant grows to a height of about two feet. Grow it indoors or provide winter protection outdoors in colder locations.

## COMMON THYME ▼

*Thymus vulgaris*



This low-growing perennial is only marginally-hardy in parts of Montana. Its aromatic leaves are used for seasoning foods and for the medicinal and perfumery properties of their oil. Sow seeds indoors. One or two plants are adequate for most families. Start new plants every three or four years, since old woody plants do not produce an abundance of tender leaves.

Harvest leaves when the plants are in bloom by clipping off five or six inches of the flowering top. Strip off the leaves, dry, and store them in a closed container.

The *Thymus* genus is complex, with many synonyms and incorrect names. Other well-known thymes include Caraway thyme (*T. herba-barona*), with the fragrance of caraway, and Sicily thyme (*T. nitidus*), used in poultry seasoning. Other thymes include *T. serpyllum* with its many varieties, and lavender-scented *T. thracicus*.

Decorative Herb Pot: a combination of rosemary, thyme, and oregano make a lovely kitchen garden pot for easy use of herbs.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the original author of this MontGuide, Dr. Bob Gough, former Extension Horticulture Specialist.

All photos by Cheryl Moore-Gough.



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**File under: Yard and Garden (Vegetables)**  
**Revised October 2019**