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GROW YOUR OWN HERBS FOR A FRESH, GREEN KITCHEN

BY CHARITY BETH LONG

Herbs are a delicious, affordable luxury. They make salads more vibrant, sauces more aromatic and can add an unexpected twist to beverages. However, they can be expensive if you buy them in the grocery store in those little plastic packages. For the \$2–\$3 you spend on a few sprigs of thyme, you could buy a seedling and start an herb garden instead.



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Luckily, now is the perfect time of year to start an herb garden, whether in the ground or as a container garden. Many herbs are perennials so the investment in a small plant of tarragon can provide enough for seasons of béarnaise sauce! And most herbs require low upkeep once established, so forget about constant watering and pruning. The best part is that herbs attract beneficial bugs such as bees and praying mantis, making them wonderful companion plants for your tomatoes and sweet bell peppers.

Even annual herbs can be more economical to grow yourself. Cilantro is an annual that is easy to grow, but it reseeds itself, which can be a blessing or a curse, depending on how organized you prefer your garden beds. Sweet basil is best when it's freshly picked, as it wilts and browns rapidly. Thai Basil, a staple in Asian curry and stir-fry, can be hard to find in ordinary grocery stores and also has a short shelf life once picked. Not a problem in a home garden, where you can cut as much as you need just before you make your recipe.

When starting an herb garden, if you are unsure where to begin, plant the basics first: oregano, thyme, sage, chives, rosemary and parsley. If you have a cat, make sure to add catnip to that list.

Want a more adventurous collection of herbs? Grow varieties you cannot find in stores. Lemon balm is a perfect addition to iced tea or to fruit salads. Salad burnet resembles cilantro but tastes like a mild cucumber and makes a nice addition to sandwiches. My favorite specialty herb is lovage, because its strong, celery-like flavor is an excellent addition to stocks and soups. This tall, leafy plant also has the added benefit of being extremely easy to grow.

Whatever herbs you decide to grow, do your research to make sure the plant is compatible with your gardening style. Anise hyssop, if left to flower, is a vigorous re-seeder, and so may be more suited for a wildflower field than your herb garden. Mint is also extremely invasive because the roots send out runners underground. So unless you want to spend a lot of time weeding, mint is best grown in a pot without drainage holes.

An herb garden will inspire your cooking. Just think of all the wonderful things you can make, such as herb butters, gourmet cocktails and homemade salad dressings. One of my best-loved ways to use herbs is in baking, specifically in sweet pastries and desserts. I find this often works best with herbs such as thyme, sage or rosemary because these savory herbs make pastries fragrant and counterbalance a dessert's sweetness.

But there are no rules! Starting an herb garden will motivate you to try new and unexpected herb combinations in your own recipes. Bon appétit!

ORANGE ROSEMARY MADELEINES

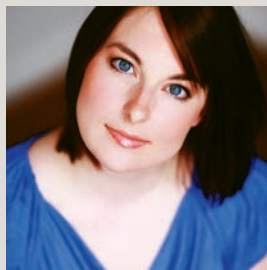
Note: This recipe makes a perfect tea cookie that is soft, citrusy and delicate. You will need madeleine pans. If your pan is not nonstick, you will need an extra tablespoon or more of butter. My pans have a dark finish, so the cookies baked rather quickly. If your pans are lighter, your madeleines may need an extra minute or two in the oven.

For the cookies

- ¾ cup butter, melted and cooled slightly
(plus more for pans, if needed)
- 1 ½ cups of sifted cake flour
- ½ tsp baking powder
- ¼ tsp sea salt
- 3 eggs (room temperature)
- 2 egg yolks (room temperature)
- ¾ cup organic granulated sugar
- 1 tsp orange liqueur
- Zest of four large oranges (about 1 ½ T)
- 2 T freshly squeezed orange juice
- 1 ½ T fresh rosemary, finely chopped

For the glaze

- ½ cup organic sugar
- 2 T water
- ¼ cup freshly squeezed orange juice
- 1 tsp orange liqueur



Charity Beth Long
is the domestic diva behind

VintageKitty.com, a home and garden journal that celebrates a fun, hands-on approach to homemaking. Follow Charity as she chronicles her pursuit to mix up the old and the new in her Victorian home in the beautiful eastern panhandle of West Virginia. Domestic bliss is not just wearing pearls while you vacuum!

Instructions

1. Melt butter and set aside.
2. Combine cake flour, baking powder and salt in a bowl.
3. In the bowl of an electric mixer, combine eggs and sugar and beat on low for a few minutes.
4. Add in orange liqueur, orange zest, orange juice and rosemary and beat on low until combined.
5. In three additions, add in flour and beat until almost all is incorporated.
6. Drizzle in the butter while the mixer is running on low. Once all the butter has been added, turn up and beat the batter on high for a minute.
7. Cover the mixing bowl and place it in the refrigerator for 30 minutes to rest.
8. Butter your madeleine pans and place them in the freezer.
9. Preheat oven to 375°F.
10. Meanwhile make the glaze by combining sugar, water and orange juice in a small saucepan.
11. Over low heat, heat the mixture while constantly stirring until the sugar melts.
12. Remove from heat, add orange liqueur. Place glaze in a small bowl and set aside.
13. Once the batter has rested, drop 1 T dollops into madeleine shells. (Do not level, flatten or stir batter for best results).
14. Bake for 9-10 minutes.
15. Cookies are done when they spring back to the touch and are lightly golden. Remove from pan immediately and let cool for a few minutes. While still warm, dip cookies in glaze and place on parchment until dry.

Makes 36 cookies.



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