

The Herbalist

By **Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener**



Whether the word is pronounced 'erb' or 'herb,' an herb is an herbaceous plant, one "...whose stem does not become woody and persistent." Herbs are among the easiest plants to grow and are usually classified as culinary, medicinal, aromatic, ornamental, or household.

Although herbs are adaptable to a wide range of growing conditions, most prefer a well-drained, neutral (pH 6 to 7) soil similar to that of a vegetable garden. A soil test is recommended to assess pH and nutrients in the soil. Raised beds may be used where the soil is poor, and amendments of compost and other organic matter will improve root growth and drainage. Herbs, however, do not require fertilization and may quickly die out if overwatered or overfed.

Most annual and perennial herbs enjoy full sun (6-8 hours per day), but there are a few exceptions. Plant far enough apart to allow for good air circulation and light. Mulch will help to keep the lower leaves clean, and this gardener prefers cocoa hulls because they are lightweight, do not hold moisture themselves, and are high in nitrogen.

The beauty of herbs is that they can be planted anywhere. It is not necessary to have a formal garden for herbs; their interesting foliage patterns and colors look stunning in a mixed annual and perennial bed or as companion plantings in the vegetable garden. Weeding and pruning the beds becomes almost pleasurable when the gardener brushes the herb plants and releases their aromatic oils!

The beginning herb gardener might want to start with culinary herbs, such as basil, chives, parsley, oregano, sage, and thyme. Over the next several months I will talk about an herb or two each month, delving into history, culture, and use.