

# The Herbalist

By Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener



## Sweet Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*; Family Labiatae)

Basil has a rich and interesting history as an object of sacred worship and of fear of its evil powers. In early Greek and Roman culture, it was believed that basil would sprout and thrive only if it was sown with curses and shouts. Parkinson noted that basil would breed scorpions if its leaves were bruised, while Culpepper named it as a remedy for snake, wasp, and bee stings. In the past it was also used medicinally as a cure for nausea and vomiting, and the seeds were used as a cure for warts. In India the plant is associated with protecting the spirit of the family and in death a basil leaf is placed on the chest of a good Hindu to serve as his passport to paradise.

Today basil is best known as a culinary herb and many varieties are available. The typical one grows about two feet high with ovate, smooth bright green leaves and a strong clovelike scent. The first white whorls of blossoms appear in July.

Basil is easily grown from seed, planted directly to the garden or in flats indoors in mid April. Seeds will not germinate in cold soil and the plant prefers weed free compost and well-rotted, manure-amended soil. Transplant seedlings grown indoors only after all danger of frost is past since basil is highly susceptible to destruction in cold weather. Seedlings should be planted about 12 inches apart. Mulch will retain warmth for the roots and moisture and will keep the leaves clean for harvest.

Harvesting can begin before the flower buds emerge. Basil usually begins blooming in mid July but it can be snipped for cooking from middle to late June. Basil will branch wildly the more you pinch it...all the more basil to cook with! It seems that if you let it flower at all it quickly decides to die out and the leaves don't seem to have the same quality. The leaves which come from the pinchings are a bit smaller, but not all that much if the soil is fertile.

Prior to frost the entire plant can be cut at ground level, gently washed and air dried. Then place in a paper bag and hang upside down in a warm, airy place to dry. After several weeks, the leaves may be rolled by hand from the stems for winter storage. As an alternative, leaves may be pinched from stems and dried in a well ventilated place on screen racks.