

Useful Herbs for Small Gardens

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John Snow International ● Europe
Promoting and Protecting Health

Introduction

Herbs are useful strong-smelling plants. People all over the world have used herbs for thousands of years for cooking, medicine or to make cosmetics such as soap, shampoo and perfume. Some herbs can be dangerous if used in the wrong way. Make sure that you know which plant should be used to treat which ailment and avoid eating or drinking any herbs that are not on the list on page 3.

Most edible herbs and spices contain important vitamins and minerals, which help to keep our bodies strong and healthy. Many edible herbs and spices can help to stimulate the appetite and soothe sore mouths and throats. Herbal remedies can be used to help ease symptoms of illnesses but they **do not** cure any illnesses (such as malaria, TB or illnesses associated with AIDS) or conditions (such as high blood pressure). Like any medicine they must be taken in small doses as prescribed by a herbalist. If you are seriously ill you should always consult a doctor and tell him or her which herbs you want to use. Some herbs can be harmful if taken with medicines, so please be sure to consult your doctor!

This book will give you simple useful information on how to grow herbs and to use them safely. We will look at some useful Exotic herbs from other countries and wild herbs and weeds that can be grown in urban areas in Zimbabwe.

Large herbs for edges of gardens or containers
Comfrey
Fennel
Lavender
Mint
Oregano
Rosemary
Nasturtiums
Rue

Small herbs for planting in beds
Basil
Chillies
Chives
Dill
Garlic
Marjoram
Thyme
Amaranth

The uses of herbs

Repelling insects

Gardeners can grow herbs around the garden to help keep insects away from their crops. Some herbs can be used to make sprays to kill or repel insects. Cutting the leaves of herbs such as rosemary, lavender and basil and using the cut leaves for mulch around plant beds helps to keep away crawling insects.

Some bushy herbs such as rosemary, lavender and fennel take up a lot of space. Plant these around the edge of the garden, not in beds. Keep trimming the leaves of the plants and using them for mulch. Plant mint and nasturtiums in containers rather than in beds as they spread quickly.

Herbs can be grown in containers near windows to help repel flies and mosquitoes. Herbs can be grown in containers near seedlings to protect them from pests.

Place dried herb leaves (especially lavender leaves or vetiver roots) at the back of food cupboards or clothes cupboards to help repel ants and cockroaches and moths. To protect stored seeds or grains from weevils mix them with dried herb leaves and wood ash.

Cooking

Herbs can be eaten raw or cooked, to add flavour to food. Some can be dried such as rosemary, marjoram, basil, chilli. Others may be preserved in oil such as basil, garlic and chilli. Fresh or lightly cooked herbs add flavour and extra vitamins and minerals to the meal particularly vitamin C and calcium. Some herbs are used to make flavoured teas such as mint, lemon verbena, and lemon grass.

Storage and drying

For home use: Cut bunches of herbs and tie the ends with string. Hang them upside down in a dry, cool, dust-free place away from the sun. After one week bring the bunches down and remove any tough stalks of stems. Store the dry herbs in clean dry containers. For selling: dry herbs in layers of dry newspaper. This preserves their colour and avoids dust.

Herbs you can eat or drink

Name	Edible part
Basil	leaves
Borage	leaves, flowers
Burnet	leaves
Calendula	flowers
Chamomile	flowers
Chervil	leaves
Chilli	Fruit
Chives	leaves
Coriander	leaves, seeds
Dill	leaves, seeds
Fennel	leaves, seeds
Garlic	bulb
Lemon grass	leaves
Lemon balm	leaves
Marjoram	leaves
Mint	leaves
Nasturtium	all parts
Oregano	leaves
Parsley	leaves
Rosemary	leaves
Rue	leaves
Sage	leaves
Tansy	leaves, flowers
Tarragon	leaves
Thyme	leaves
Verbena	leaves

Cosmetics

Some herbs can be used to make substances used to enhance the skin or hair. Many herbs especially lavender, lemon grass, vetiver, geranium and rosemary are used for perfume, The leaves may be soaked in boiling water to release the scented oils.

Medicine

Herbal remedies have been used for hundreds of years as home treatments for ailments. Some of the medicines that we use today such as aspirin come from herbal remedies. Remember herbs can help to keep you healthy by giving you important vitamins and minerals. They can also help to sooth symptoms (such as sore throat and loss of appetite) but they do not cure any diseases (such as AIDS or Malaria) or conditions (such as high blood pressure or diabetes).

WARNING

Like all medicines use herbs with care. Home-made herbal remedies have not been tested or measured by doctors.

- *Make sure that you use the correct herb for the illness.*
- *For serious conditions always see a qualified doctor.*
- *Do not apply herbal remedies in the eyes, ears, nose or vaginally.*
- *Do not eat or drink herbal remedies unless you are sure the plant is edible.*

- *Do not eat or drink large quantities of herbal remedies.*
- *Avoid taking herbal remedies if you are pregnant or breast-feeding.*
- *Avoid herbal remedies if you are taking other medicines, especially anti-retroviral drugs.*

The following are dangerous if eaten in large quantities:

- ❖ **Comfrey** – may cause cancer if eaten in large amounts.
- ❖ **Wormwood** – can cause stomach problems. Use only a few of the leaves or shoots. Do not use repeatedly.
- ❖ **Pennyroyal** – could be harmful to pregnant women.
- ❖ **Rue** – can cause stomach problems. Use only a few of the leaves. Do not use repeatedly.
- ❖ **Garlic** can interfere with the action of some drugs particularly certain Anti Retrovirals (ARVs)

Growing herbs

Many herbs can be grown easily from cuttings or other vegetative methods. You can grow the following from seed: basil, chilli, fennel, marjoram, nasturtium, rue, tansy, chives, dill, sage, tarragon, thyme, sage, and coriander.

Growing conditions

Most herbs need a warm sunny position with light well-drained soil. They should be pruned regularly to encourage bushing.

Cuttings

Basil, lavender, nasturtium, oregano, rosemary, rue, sage, thyme, and yarrow grow easily from cuttings. Take cuttings during the cool, dry season. Choose healthy plants. Cut mature, 5cm sections from the stems with a sharp blade. Remove some of the leaves. Dip the lower ends of each cutting in wood ash to reduce fungal infections. Plant the cuttings in containers containing a mixture of half river sand or sandy soil and half compost. Avoid over-watering. Plant out when the first new leaves begin to appear.

Twelve useful exotic herbs	Eight useful wild herbs
Basil	Aloe
Chilli	Amaranth
Comfrey	Blackjack
Fennel	Mexican marigold
Garlic	Milkweed
Lavender	Wild basil
Lemon Grass	Zumbani
Marjoram	
Moringa	
Nasturtium	
Rosemary	
Rue	

Twelve exotic herbs

❖ Basil: *Ocimum basilicum*

An annual plant that can grow up to 30cm.

Uses

Plant basil in beds or containers to repel pests. Use leaves for mulch. Basil is used to flavour food and is said to stimulate the appetite, digestion and nerves. It can be eaten raw or cooked, dried for storage or preserved in oil.

How to grow

Sow seeds in containers from August – February. Transplant when 10cm tall into beds or containers. Basil likes a warm, sunny position and well-drained soil. Keep well watered. Pinch off the tips of the shoots to prevent flowering and make the plant last longer.

❖ **Chilli: *Capsicum annum, C. frutescens***

A branched shrubby annual growing up to 1.5m.

Uses

The fruits are used fresh or dried to flavour soups, stews, curries and sauces. Dried chillies can be ground into powder. Chilli can be used to make an insecticidal spray.

How to grow

Plant the seeds in seedbeds or containers. Transplant when 10cm tall into beds or containers. Prune the top shoots to encourage branching. Chillies like loose, rich soil. Harvest when the fruits are green or red.

Chilli and garlic spray

Grind up five red chillies and five cloves of garlic. Put in a container and pour over half a litre of boiling water. Leave to soak overnight. Add a teaspoon of dishwasher/ washing powder or green soap. Spray affected parts of plant.

❖ **Comfrey: *Symphytum officinale***

A fast-growing, perennial herb reaching 90cm.

Uses

Comfrey leaves contain high levels of nitrogen and potassium. Harvest the leaves for mulch, compost, to fill pit beds or to make liquid manure. Crushed comfrey leaves can produce an ointment for sprains, bruises, rheumatism, arthritis and swellings. Use the leaves as a poultice for boils, abscesses and splinters. The leaves are high in protein and vitamins and can be eaten fresh or cooked or fed to livestock. A tea made from the leaves and root is said to help relieve coughs.

Warning: Do not eat comfrey in large quantities on a regular basis.

How to grow

Comfrey can be grown from root cuttings sown all year round. Water the soil around a healthy, large plant. Dig deeply around the plant with a spade and lift the plant out with its roots. Cut the roots into sections.

Plant out the sections. Remember to plant them the same way up as they were growing. Water regularly. Once established, it can tolerate dry periods. Comfrey can be grown in sun or partial shade in most soils.

Liquid manure

Fill a plastic container with comfrey leaves. Add a little water. Close the container but do not tighten the lid. Leave in a warm place for two weeks. Once the leaves have turned to a thick, strong-smelling liquid, they are ready to use. Dilute one part liquid manure to twenty parts water. Apply to seedlings, container plants or unhealthy-looking plants.

Warning: *Use liquid manure sparingly as it can cause plants to grow too quickly producing large, soft green leaves that attract pests.*

❖ **Fennel: *Foeniculum vulgare***

A tough perennial with pale feathery leaves reaching 60-90cm. Dill: *Anethum graveolens* looks similar to fennel but grows smaller and has blue/grey leaves. Dill is a sensitive plant and does not live as long as fennel.

Uses

Plant fennel along the edge of the garden. The flowers help to attract insects which kill pests. The leaves, seeds and stem can be eaten fresh or cooked. It can also be dried.

How to grow

Sow seed from August to February in well-drained loamy soil in sun or partial shade. Fennel does not tolerate acid conditions. Prune the plant to encourage branching.

❖ **Garlic: *Allium sativum***

A bulbous plant reaching 75cm.

Uses

Plant garlic in beds as a pest repellent. The crushed cloves may be made into a pesticide. (See chilli and garlic spray above). The fresh cloves can be cut up and added as flavouring to stews and soups.

How to grow

Plant cloves from January to March in well-drained fertile soil in full sun. Feed the growing plants with compost or well-rotted manure and mulch with comfrey leaves and wood ash. Harvest the bulbs when the leaves have turned yellow. Leave the bulbs to dry in the sun. Store by hanging indoors in a cool dark place.

Warning: *Garlic can interfere with the action of some drugs particularly Anti Retrovirals (ARVs)*

❖ **Lavender: *Lavandula officinalis***

A bushy evergreen shrub 60-90cm.

Uses

Plant this tough, repellent plant along the edge of beds, in hedges, along paths and around fruit trees. The strong-smelling leaves can be used for repellent mulch or as perfume. Lavender tea made from the leaves and shoot tips is said to relieve headaches.

How to grow

Plant cuttings in August in sleeves containing sandy soil. Be careful not to over-water. Plant out in full sun in well-drained soil. Prune the plant regularly to encourage dense branching.

❖ **Lemon grass: *Cymbopogon citrates***

A bushy bunching grass up to 1m.

Uses

The plant repels insects and the leaves make repellent mulch. Plant it along paths and around the vegetable garden and fruit trees. The leaves make a lemon-flavoured tea which soothes a sore throat. They can be used to flavour soups and stews. Perfume oil, which repels mosquitoes, can be extracted from the leaves.

How to grow

Lemon grass can be grown from root slips planted in warm weather with irrigation. This bunch grass needs extra water during dry periods.

❖ **Marjoram and Oregano**

Origanum onites

Marjoram is a short annual herb reaching 20cm.

Origanum majorana is a tall perennial herb reaching 60cm.

Uses

Marjoram can be planted as a repellent in beds. Oregano should be planted along paths around fruit trees, in containers and on boundaries as it is bushy. Oregano should be pruned regularly and the leaves used for mulch. Both herbs are used to flavour soups and stews. Marjoram can be eaten fresh. The leaves of both herbs may be dried.

How to grow

Plant in full sun in well-drained soil. Marjoram grows from seed. Oregano can be grown from cuttings or root divisions.

❖ **Moringa: *Moringa olifera***

Moringa is a fast-growing tree that can be pruned into a small bush or grown as an annual vegetable.

Uses

Moringa is an excellent source of vitamins and minerals especially calcium and Vitamin A. The leaves, green pods and flowers can be cooked as vegetables. The leaves may be dried and made into a powder to sprinkle into soups and stews. This fast-growing tree can be planted along boundaries and pruned to avoid it shading other crops. It can also be grown in beds as a vegetable and harvested after one year. The dried seeds can be used to purify water. Moringa tolerates hot, dry conditions and sandy soil. Give the tree some water to ensure leaves all year round

How to grow

Plant the seeds in sleeves containing well-drained fertile soil. Give the seedlings plenty of water at first. The trees can be planted out into the garden once they are 20cm tall. As a vegetable you can plant Moringa in rows in beds then harvest the whole plant at the end of the growing season. As a tree Moringa can be pruned to save space and encourage leaf growth.

❖ **Nasturtium: *Tropaeolum majus***

A short annual plant. The bush types reach 30cm. The climbing types can reach 180cm.

Uses

The leaves and flowers may be eaten raw. They have a strong taste and can be used instead of salt or pepper. They contain high levels of vitamin C.

How to grow

Nasturtiums take from seed or cuttings. They will self-seed under favourable conditions. They need full sun and well-drained soils. Climbing varieties need trellises.

❖ **Rosemary: *Rosmarinus officinalis***

A bushy perennial shrub reaching 150cm.

Uses

Plant this tough, repellent plant along the edge of beds, in hedges, along paths and around fruit trees. The leaves can be used as repellent mulch. Use the fresh or dried leaves to flavour stews and soups. To make a softening hair rinse soak the leaves in very hot water overnight and then strain out. Pour over the hair after washing.

How to grow

Rosemary takes easily from cuttings or root division. The plant needs full sun and well-drained dry soil.

❖ Rue: *Ruta graveolens*

An evergreen perennial shrub reaching 90cm.

Uses

Plant this strong-smelling repellent in beds, in hedges and along paths. If planted around the house it helps to repel flies. Prune the plant if it takes up too much space. Rue can be added to stews. Rue tea is said to be good for coughs, croup and bronchitis but it should be taken in small quantities and not repeatedly.

How to Grow

Rue grows easily from seeds, root division or cuttings. It needs full sun and prefers well-drained, poor soil.

Eight wild herbs

Please consult a traditional herbalist before using any of these remedies to treat illness.

❖ Aloe: *Gavakava, Aloe chabaudii*

This can grow up to 1 m in height, often found in dense groups. The leaves are grey-green, turning pinkish red in exposed dry conditions. Its flowers are brick red to pinkish in colour.

Uses

The plant can be grown as a windbreak on the edges of gardens. The leaves are used to sooth constipation, diarrhoea in animals, coccidiosis in poultry and for dressing wounds.

How to grow

Most aloes are grown from seeds however; they can be grown from separate shoots as well.

❖ Amaranth: *Amarathus hybridus* - mowa, imbuya, *A. spinosa* - mowa danga, imbuya, *A. Thunbergii* - bonongwe, bowa, imbuya

A branched annual reaching 1m.

Uses

The leaves and young shoots are eaten as spinach. This is also dried and stored for winter use. The leaves can be used for mulch or liquid manure. Dried *Amaranthus spinosa* is used as a remedy for headaches.

How to grow

Amaranth is grown from seed. The seeds can be sown in seedbeds and later transplanted to beds. This plant grows well in full sun in most soils. However, it is most productive in soils rich in organic matter.

❖ Blackjack: *Bidens pilosa*, mhuuyu, nyamaradza, ucucuza

An annual herb, 15-60 cm tall.

Uses

The young leaves, shoots and stem can be cooked or dried for storage. The plant is a remedy for rheumatism, sore eyes or ears, colic, diarrhoea, heartburn, cough and fits in children. The powdered seeds are applied as a painkiller. The plant can be used to make a pesticide or kept with stored grain to repel pests.

How to grow

These common weeds tend to self seed in most disturbed soils. They tolerate dry periods and poor soils.

Black jack spray

Cover mature seeds in boiling water and soak overnight or crush the whole plant. Add 1 litre of water and a teaspoon of soap. Use immediately to treat sucking and crawling pests.

❖ Mexican marigold: *Tagetes minuta*, mbanda, imbanje

An erect annual from 10cm up to 250cm with small yellow flowers.

Uses

The dried plants can be used to keep pests out of grain bins. The plant should be left growing in the garden as it is said to repel eelworm in the soil. Use leaves as mulch against ants. A yellow dye can be made from the plant. The plant can be rubbed on the body to repel mosquitoes and flies.

How to grow

Collect mature seeds and sow in beds.

Marigold spray

Soak crushed plants in 2 litres of water for 24 hours. Add a little wood ash. Filter and spray.

❖ **Milk weed: *Sonchus oleraceus*, rurimirwemombe, ulimilwenkomo**

An annual herb 30-150cm high.

Uses

The young leaves and roots are cooked as vegetables. The plant should be left in beds as it attracts aphids away from other vegetables.

How to grow

These common weeds tends to self seed in most disturbed soils. They tolerate dry periods and poor soils.

❖ **Wild basil: *Ocimum canum*, zinhuhwenhuhwe, amakha**

A shrubby herb reaching 90 cm with strong-smelling leaves and small purple flowers.

Uses

The plant is used to treat a wide range of ailments including cholera, convulsions and dysentery. If the plant is rubbed on the skin it repels flies and mosquitoes. The plant can be used as a mild fungicide, insecticide and repellent. It should be planted around the edges of gardens, cropping areas and fruit trees.

How to grow

Collect mature seeds and sow in beds.

Wild basil spray

Soak crushed leaves in water over night and spray. This infusion can be poured onto seedbeds to kill pests.

❖ **Zumbani: *Lippia javanica*, zumbani, Umsuzwane**

This is a woody shrub reaching 2m. The leaves have a lemon smell when crushed.

Uses

The leaves and twigs are used as tea, mainly to treat coughs, colds, fever and bronchitis. The plant can be grown as a repellent windbreak on the edges of gardens. A pesticide can be made from the crushed leaves and branches.

How to grow

This is best grown from cuttings when the temperatures are high towards the rainy season. Zumbani tolerates most soils but prefers full sun and well-drained soils.