



HERB TERRACE

On the Herb Terrace, visitors are encouraged not to pick - but to “scratch ‘n sniff” - and experience the scent-sational world of herbs. Herbs are easy to grow in our climate and this garden features southern favorites like rosemary and thyme, as well as exotic fragrances and tastes of far away cultures and lands. Displays change every spring; late summer offers the broadest of transcontinental experiences, but this garden offers subtle interest throughout the year.

WHAT IS AN HERB?

Herbs are plants used for flavorings, fragrances, dyes, and medicines. Humans have been cultivating herbs - that is, growing them deliberately - for almost as long as cereal, fruit, and vegetable crops. *Herb* is a horticultural term, not a botanical term, and certain trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials, and annuals are classified as herbs. In a culinary sense, typically herbs are leaves and sometimes stems. Flavorings derived from other plant parts, including flowers, fruits, bark, and roots are usually called spices. Many herbs are beautiful, highly ornamental plants in their own right. Because of their heavily aromatic foliage they are seldom browsed by plant-eaters like whitetail deer.

HERBAL HISTORY

Indigenous cultures throughout the world employed plants in their everyday lives to an extent unimaginable to us today. They had intimate knowledge about which plants were useful for relieving certain sicknesses, which could be used for flavoring drinks and food, which had pleasant (or repellent) aromas, and which could be used to create bright colors for face and body decoration. They understood where these plants grew naturally, and eventually learned how to grow them in dedicated spaces like other crops. Interest in herbs reached a peak in the middle ages when the *Doctrine of Signatures* became popular. Developed prior to modern scientific study, the *Doctrines* followers believed that plants with parts similar in appearance to human body parts could be used to treat maladies of that body part. This is the origin of common names like liverwort, lungwort, and bladderwort (*wort* being another word for plant).



Asclepias incarnata, swamp milkweed

GROWING HERBS

Although rustic in appearance, the Herb Terrace is a good example of how herb gardens should be designed. First, the cross-tie planters have been amended with a well-drained soil blend so the roots of the herbs - many originating in dry climates like southern Europe and Mexico - do not rot during our moist winters. Soil pH is determined with soil testing and kept near-neutral, 6.0-7.5, with as-needed applications of pelletized dolomitic limestone. Second, the terraces face due south and are virtually shade-free, maximizing the amount of

light on the plants; herbs love sun. Third, the garden has good “air drainage;” breezes freely move up, down, and across it, drying foliage and lessening the chances of fungal problems.



Ocimum tenuiflorum, Thai basil

Herbs are easy to grow if you follow these simple guidelines of sun, drainage, and air movement. Container gardening with herbs offers another possibility if space is limited. Many herbs do quite well when grown this way, although woody and perennial types will not live as long as they would if planted in the ground. Some (mostly annual types) will even withstand the dry and always-warm conditions of a windowsill for several months, if there's enough light. Fertilizers should only be used sparingly, if at all, and always following the manufacturers' directions. Pesticides are seldom necessary and should never be used on or around herbs destined for your table.



Common Name	Botanical Name	Plant Type	Size	Flower Color	Exposure	Uses	Notes
basil	<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	annual	2-3'	white	full sun	C, O	many cultivars and flavors available
bay	<i>Laurus nobilis</i>	tree	to 10'	pale yellow	full sun/part shade	C, F, M, O	protect; frost-tender in Birmingham
catmint	<i>Nepeta</i> spp.	perennial	3-4'	purple, blue	full sun/part shade	F, O	works like catnip; likes it hot and dry
chives	<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	perennial bulb	1-2'	purple	full sun	C, O	flowers edible also
cilantro, coriander	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	annual	1.5-2.5'	white or mauve	sun/part shade	C	leaves=cilantro; seeds=coriander; self sows
fennel	<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	perennial/annual	3-5'	yellow	full sun	C, F	swallowtail butterfly host
garden sage	<i>Salvia officinalis</i>	perennial	1-3'	white, purple	full sun/part shade	C, F	classic culinary sage; requires good drainage
lavender	<i>Lavandula x intermedia</i> 'Provence'	evergreen sub-shrub	1-2'	purple	full sun	M, F, O	local favorite; heat-tolerant
mint	<i>Mentha</i> spp.	perennial	1-2'	purple, pink, white	full sun/part shade	C, F, M, O	aggressive in-ground; use in containers only
oregano	<i>Origanum vulgare</i>	perennial	1-2'	white	full sun	C	many cultivars available
parsley	<i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	biennial	1-2'	green-yellow	full sun	C	replace every year
pineapple sage	<i>Salvia elegans</i>	tender perennial	3-4'	red	full sun/part shade	C, F, O	attracts butterflies and hummingbirds
rosemary	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	evergreen shrub	3-4'	lilac, blue	full sun	C, F, M, O	once established, do not transplant
tarragon	<i>Tagetes lucida</i>	perennial	3-4'	yellow	full sun	C, F	use for anise flavor
thyme	<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	evergreen groundcover	0.5-1'	rose	full sun	C	many cultivars; requires good drainage
	C - culinary	F - flavor/fragrance	M - medicinal	O - ornamental			

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A GARDEN OF CULTURE

IF YOU PLANT IT, THEY WILL COME

Many herbal flowers are favorites of bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. Undisturbed, bees are interested only in the energy-rich nectar treat provided by flowers (unlike aggressive wasps which are attracted to human foods like meat or soda). Nectar often acts like an intoxicant to bees and can make them sluggish or hyperactive. Butterflies regularly visit herb flowers and certain herbs are also food sources for caterpillars, their young. To enjoy the adults, make sure you do not harm the juveniles! Hummingbirds are primarily attracted to red and orange flowers, especially those with long, tubular shapes.

*Foeniculum vulgare*, fennel (yellow)**JUST A PINCH**

The joy of cooking with home-grown herbs is a special treat and unless you're cooking for a crowd, a little goes a long way, so you need not make a huge investment in numerous plants. Plus, herbs are usually sold in small, inexpensive sizes. Label your herbs very clearly in the garden or container so you end up with the correct ingredients for the recipe you are preparing. Regular pinching or pruning will keep your plants compact, which saves space, and prevents them from getting leggy and rangy (and losing some flavor).

These easy-to-grow plants have been cultivated for centuries by gardeners who have found them to be medical necessities, culinary pleasures, landscape delights, crafting amusements, and butterfly and hummingbird attractors. More information about herbs can be found in The Library at Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Interested in helping out in the Herb Terrace? Contact our Volunteer Office at 205.414.3962 for more information and to join our volunteer herb group.

*Cynara cardunculus*, cardoon*Stachytarphetum cayennensis*, porter weed (purple)

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