



# HERBS

The mention of herbs will very often bring thoughts of the fresh pots sold in supermarkets, of basil or parsley, amongst others. Or, packets of dried herbs that can be added to so many meals.

The Wikipedia definition is as follows:

*"In general use, herbs are a widely distributed and widespread group of plants with savoury or aromatic properties that are used for flavouring and garnishing food, for medicinal purposes, or for fragrances; excluding vegetables and other plants consumed for macronutrients."*

In fact, the majority of plants thought of as garden weeds are valued in the herbal world. Dandelion, plantain, nettle, chickweed, and sow thistle (to name just a few) all are worthy of a place alongside chamomile, fennel, chives, as well as in our kitchens and medicine cabinets. Even grass has a place in the human diet--barley grass or wheatgrass--not the species used to grow our lawns.



In nature, plants must survive and reproduce in often harsh environments. They don't waste energy on making tasty or good looking food for humans, only for those creatures they wish to attract to pollinate, or spread their seed... they just want to survive. Food plants that are bred to increase the size, taste and appearance of the part they are grown for will often result in plants that are weak in comparison to "weeds" that will compete with them.

Herb farms often specialise in growing herbs only. Herbs are easy in some ways, as they require little fertility and have few pests. At harvest-time however, herbs grown commercially need more work than food crops as they often need hand harvesting to safely gather the delicate parts required for market.

## Herbs as Part of Farm Life

Herbs are usually less bred or developed than vegetables or other food plants. They will grow with little attention and are usually best not fed. They, generally, grow better in poor soils.

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On organic farms and those practising permaculture, herbs play an important role as companion plants. These will protect and enhance the crops they are interplanted with. For example, calendula will attract pollinators; chives will repel aphids; both herbs can be harvested in their own right; these herbs are delicious in salads.

As part of the drive to increase biodiversity, farmers are being encouraged to let native wildflowers, many of which are also herbs, to flourish at the edges of the fields.

### Herbs as Food



We are all familiar with peppermint as a flavouring. Pizza lovers will know oregano as a herb used to enhance their favourite combination. Licorice is common as a childhood sweet treat, although these days the confectionery bears little resemblance to the root of the plant so-loved in times are gone by. The same goes for marshmallow....pink and white cushion of sugar? No, The original marshmallow is a beautiful plant that grows in damp marshy areas. Here, again, the root was used to make a sweet treat. Today more commonly the roots, leaves, and flowers

are used in herbal medicine.

As well as using herbs to flavour dishes, they can make a great tea, syrup, or wine. Young leaves of many herbs, including those classed as weeds, are great in a salad; they are nutritious and tasty. Top the salad off with flower petals from daisies, calendula, nasturtium, borage, and many more.

### Fresh Herbs

Most people would agree that dried or frozen lettuce is not a good idea, however, you will find dried chives and parsley in supermarkets. Fresh herbs have vitamins and many other volatile elements that are lost or depleted by long term storage.

Many herbs can be grown in pots on a windowsill. It is also a good idea to plant some, not so far from the kitchen door.



### Stored Herbs

Sometimes storage is necessary, as seasons are often short and meals or festive events occur all year round. There are different techniques for eco-herb or based on the situation.

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### Drying

The simplest and possibly most effective method for annual herbs is to pull the plant up by its roots and, after removing any soil, hang the plant upside down in a dark and airy space.



Herb dryers are available, but these use electricity. Solar herb dryers can be made; these use the sun's heat to dry the herbs, but without letting the sunlight bleach the herbs driving off their essential oils.

⇒[Click to see \*DIY Solar Dryer Designs\*](#) ⇐

### Processing

You can make herb oil, which is a good way to preserve the volatile chemicals that get lost by drying. Alternatively, you can make herb pastes, or sauces, like pesto. These often contain salt, which can give blood pressure problems, but if you keep track of how much you have put in it is possible to keep to safe levels. Pickled herb sauces like Sriracha use lactose-fermentation for preservation.

### Freezing

Freezing is also an option, but it is not great... You can get the best results by putting the clean and dry (but not *dried*) herbs into airtight containers and then freezing them. Freezing pesto and other sauces is also an option, but the taste and texture are not great.

### Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine is as old as human history. Every plant has constituents that help the plant to survive and can help life stay healthy. Animals have always known how plants help their health as well as being a food source. People, too, have always known this, down through history there have always been people in every village who have used and passed on their knowledge to keep the village healthy.



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## WWOOF Ireland Learning Guide

Over the last 70 years or so, pharmaceuticals have taken over this role, but the herbs are still there. The herbs are ready to help us, especially as the pharmaceuticals prove not to be the total answer. As we go forward, herbs are beginning to become more accepted once again by mainstream healthcare.



### Related Videos & Websites

- ⇒ [Making Irish Lavender Oil](#) ⇐
- ⇒ [Irish Herbs, Plant Medicines Growing in Dublin](#) ⇐

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