

Garden Update

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Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator in Dodge County

National Herbs and Spices Day

June 10 is National Herbs and Spices Day. Avid gardeners know that herbs and spices lend excellence to food, add nutrients to our diet, and are easy to grow.

Herbs are those flavorful leaves we add to dishes while spices are the seeds. Take cilantro as an example. The leaves are chopped, minced, or added whole to salsas, dips, soups, and salads. The seeds, known as coriander, can be harvested and used whole, or ground into a fine powder. Both the leaves and seeds come from the cilantro plant, but the leaves are considered an herb and the seeds a spice.

Fresh herbs can be pricey at the grocery store, so why not try growing them yourself? Herbs are broadly divided into two groups—annuals and perennials. They are also categorized by how best to start them in the garden—from seeds or by starter plants. Annuals like dill, basil, and cilantro can be easily direct-sown from seed into the garden and cost-wise are a simple way to grow lots of plants. Perennial herbs are best placed in the garden as starter plants, which can be started indoors in March, or by purchasing plants from a garden center. Perennial herbs include lavender, lovage, oregano, mint, sage, and thyme. Rosemary is another perennial herb but only a perennial in locations further south as it won't overwinter here. Grow rosemary in a pot to move it indoors in the fall. Parsley is a biennial and easy to start in the garden from seed or started early indoors.

Site the herb garden in a place that receives 7 or more hours of direct sunlight daily. Herbs will have the strongest fragrance and flavor when grown in a full sun location. It's also handy to have the container/garden close to the kitchen door, so herbs can be harvested as needed when cooking or baking. If your garden soil is heavy clay or very sandy, amend the soil with compost or well-aged manure before planting. Water seeds daily to promote germination, backing off the frequency of watering once plants are established. Herbs need an inch of water per week, so irrigate when rainfall is limited. Minimize droplet splash by holding the water spigot close to the ground. This helps prevent foliar disease development.

Pinch away flowers or sheer back herb plants to keep them fuller and producing lots of leaves. The flowers can be a colorful edible addition to salads and dips. Harvest herbs in the morning hours when flavors are at their peak. The fuzziness of herb leaves can hold dirt, so wash down plants the day before harvesting to loosen and rinse away soil. Then leaves can be harvested the next morning when leaves are clean and dry.

There are few insect and disease problems affecting herbs but be aware of the swallowtail caterpillar that likes to feed on leaves of dill and parsley. This caterpillar develops into the beautiful swallowtail butterfly, an important pollinator in our area, so plant extra herbs to share the garden's bounty with them!

More information about growing herbs can be found on the Gro Big Red blog: <https://go.unl.edu/9wig>.