

Thanksgiving in the Herb Garden – Parsley, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme (& Chives!)

by Elaine Homstad – Master Gardener

Your summer herb garden is a blessing! Great herbs for the summer garden include basil (of course!), tarragon and oregano (both tender perennials, meaning that although they will come back in the spring, they will die back at the first hard frost), and of course, the ones mentioned above.

But...what about your fall garden? In Fairfax County, we do not get our first frost until mid-November. And even then, if your herb garden is in pots, or in a semi-protected spot, there are several herbs that will easily survive until Thanksgiving. Great herbs to have in your garden are parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme and chives. These are all perennial herbs. The parsley (technically a biennial) may not survive a harsh winter, but most of the other herbs will.

So, which ones do you chose, and how do you plant and care for them?

The following are excellent choices to include in your herb garden if you want to still be harvesting herbs in November:

Parsley – you can choose either the curly or flat leaf parsley. Flat leaf (Italian) parsley is the preferred one for cooking, since it is more flavorful. Curly parsley is generally used as a culinary decoration, but can also be used in cooking, if a less peppery flavor is desired. Cultivars to look for are ***Petroselinum neapolitanum*** (Italian or flat leaf) and ***Petroselinum crispum*** (curly).

Sage – there are many types of culinary sage. Sage can be quite prolific, and you need to be aware of that when you plant it. Be sure you give it plenty of space. Additionally, you should prune it back (ideally by using the leaves) in July. You will still have a very bushy plant in November. For culinary use, the best type of sage to have is ***Salvia officinalis*** (common sage). Pineapple Sage (***Salvia elegans***), which bears lovely red flowers, is attractive to bees and hummingbirds, and has lovely citrusy (really smells like pineapple!) leaves. It is not, however, an herb that will withstand frost.

Rosemary – upright rosemary is the best type to have. The primary cultivar is ***Rosmarinus officinalis***. Although it is classified as a perennial for Zones 8-10, if it is in a sheltered spot that gets full sun, it can easily survive our winters. I have one that is planted near my dryer vent, and during the winter, in times of snow or ice, inverting a large bucket or trash can over it can help to protect it from the elements.

Thyme – this is another plant that has many cultivars. If you are choosing thyme for your herb garden, be sure to choose the culinary type, ***Thymus vulgaris***. Other types of culinary thyme include Lemon thyme, English thyme and Silver (variegated) thyme. There are also other wonderful thyme plants that are great for planting along walkways, often marketed as “steppables”. These are also known as Creeping Thyme.

Chives—a wonderful herb to have in your garden. There are two main types of chives – garlic and onion. Onion chives are the cultivar ***Allium schoenoprasum***. This is the most common one, with a rounded blade and a pronounced, though subtle, onion flavor. However, garlic chives (***Allium tuberosum***) are an

interesting addition to your herb garden. The leaves are flatter, and have a mild garlic/onion flavor. The flowers are a beautiful pale purple bulb shape, and are wonderful for either decorative or culinary uses.

Growing these herbs is actually very simple. All have very similar growing requirements. They need full sun (six hours minimum); well-drained soil, amended with compost, but not too rich, and generally not fertilized; and they do better with benign neglect rather than loving attention. Rosemary, sage, oregano and thyme particularly do not like overwatering. Parsley and chives, being more water-rich plants, can use regular watering, but will yellow and rot at ground level with too much water.

These plants are also naturally resistant to most insect damage, due to their natural oils. You may see some leaf damage on your parsley, primarily from caterpillars of the wonderful Tiger Swallowtail butterfly, which is the state insect of Virginia, but such damage is generally minimal, and you can just not use those leaves if it bothers you. Aphids and spider mites can sometimes be a problem, particularly during the drought conditions which can occur here in July and August, but good cultivation practices of sanitation and pruning will usually control these pests. It is always important to try the least intrusive methods of control. Since you are going to be consuming these herbs, you will want to stay away from the use of pesticides or other chemicals.

Starting these herbs from nursery plants is the easiest way, although they can also be started from seeds, cuttings, division, or layering. The Virginia Cooperative Extension website has some great information about herb gardening at <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-420/426-420.html>

Your autumn herb garden will reward you with a bounty of herbs that are ideal for your Thanksgiving table. Add them to your favorite stuffing recipe for a great treat!