

Growing Herbs Indoors

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Many kitchen gardeners love the convenience of fresh herbs at home, and what could be more convenient than an indoor herb garden? The ideal setting for an indoor herb garden is the kitchen, where you can snip fresh herbs and use them for home cooking. But herbs can be grown in any sunny room.

To grow well indoors, herbs need as much natural light as possible. Place them in a sunny spot near a window where they'll get at least 4 hours of sun daily. Windows that face south or southwest are the best for sun, though east- or west-facing windows also will do. North-facing windows are not bright enough.

If you're not sure whether a spot gets enough light, try this test. On a sunny to partly sunny day, turn off all lights and periodically check on the natural sunlight. How much sun does the spot get throughout the day?

The best way to ruin a tabletop or windowsill is to let a potted plant drain on it. Likewise, the best way to ruin most herbs is to let them sit in water, which causes root rot. Be sure to use a saucer, liner, or drain pan to catch water and protect your surface. A clay saucer lets moisture pass through, so opt for plastic, rubber, or metal instead.

Clay pots help with drainage, but they can dry out quickly. Try a glazed or plastic container that won't dry out as quickly as clay.

Use a premium potting mix to pot your indoor herbs. And by all means, be sure your pots have drainage holes!

Indoor herbs prefer the same temperatures that most people do—around 65 to 70 degrees F. At night, temperatures near a window may drop to 55 or 60, but most herbs like that, too. Keep foliage from touching glass to protect from getting nipped by cold.

Basil is trickier. Many kitchen gardeners like basil in their indoor garden. If you have plenty of sun and warmth indoors, basil should thrive, but don't keep it on a cool windowsill. Basil leaves will droop and fade after a short time in cool air. It prefers indoor temperatures in the 70s day and night.

Remember that the air next to a window will be cooler in winter (or hotter in summer) than your average indoor temperature, so adjust your plants accordingly. Dry air, whether from air conditioning or heating, is hard on most herbs, so give them a weekly shower in the sink.

Indoor herb plants will probably stretch and be spindlier than plants in the outdoors, but they will still give you plenty of fresh clippings. Fertilize regularly—be sure to follow directions and avoid the temptation to over fertilize.

Growing anything isn't easy (and yes, you may kill off a few plants before you get the hang of it); just start with the simple plants. Easier herbs to grow include: bay, chives, Kaffir lime, lemongrass, mint, Vietnamese coriander, cilantro, parsley and lemon balm. More difficult options are oregano, rosemary, thyme, basil and sage.

INDOOR HERB GROWING TIPS

- Light is the most important aspect of growing indoor herbs, and many people don't have enough of it to support herbs. Six to eight hours of light per day is optimal.
- Herbs don't need that much water. Overwatering is one of the biggest mistakes trying to grow herbs inside.
- High-quality organic potting soil with good drainage is a must, and it should be rich, loamy, and not compacted.
- Herbs are fairly hearty, but they still like to be fed a good organic fertilizer like fish emulsion (be aware: it stinks) or liquid seaweed. You're growing herbs for their leaves, not their flowers, so find a fertilizer that doesn't promote blooming.
- Cutting your herbs encourages growth. But don't cut more than a third off at a time.
The Colorado State University Master Gardeners are trained volunteers and can answer your questions. Call the Extension Office at 970-498-6000 or email them at larimermg@gmail.com.

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