

# GROW HERBS INDOORS

Grow your own herbs at home!



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## Plant Your Own Indoor Herb Garden

### Everyone Can Be a Farmer - Even You!

A great way to flavor your life and feel connected to food is to grow your own. For those unfamiliar with gardening or farming, an herb or two is a great way to start. You don't need a backyard or outdoor space (or direct sunlight!) anymore - you can do it with a bookshelf in your small city apartment.

If you're a city dweller with no land and little-to-no knowledge of growing food, just follow these simple steps to grow in whatever space you have.

Please note - you can grow different types of food depending on how much space you have, but we're focusing on herbs and having space the size of a window ledge or shelf.

## Steps

- Choose your space
- Decide what to grow
- Grow it!

## What You Need

- Light
- Organic potting mix
- Organic seaweed fertilizer
- Pot
- Scissors
- Seeds or starter plant
- Water

It's that simple!



*oregano*



*dill*



*tarragon*



*bay*



*basil*



*parsley*

## Choose Your Space

If you get a lot of sunlight, a window ledge could be a good option. If not, you'll need to invest in some lights and find a place in your apartment or house that has air circulation. A windowless kitchen is fine; the kitchen cupboard is not.

Herbs do best growing at a temperature of 65 to 75 degrees, basically the temperature we like.

### *Window Ledge*

- Herbs need 6 to 8 hours of bright sunlight a day, so make sure your window gets a lot of sun. For best results, grow in a window that has southern or southwestern exposure.
- The temperature next to a window will be more extreme than the thermostat in the house - so in cold weather, the temperature next to the window will be much colder than the rest of the house; when hot outside, the plant will get warmer. You must take this into consideration when growing plants by windows so they don't freeze or burn.
- Once a week, turn the plant so it grows evenly.

*Plants grow best in windows with southern or southwestern exposure.*

This is common sense, but don't grow an herb you don't like the taste of or don't normally eat unless you are committed to trying/using it - or you decide to grow for other people.

Don't want to spend money on plants or seeds? Check out [www.PlantSwap.org](http://www.PlantSwap.org) or [www.Freecycle.org](http://www.Freecycle.org) to see if your neighborhood swaps and/or gives away plants and/or seeds. You can also look to see if there is a Facebook Group for the Buy Nothing project in your neighborhood. (Buy Nothing is a great resource to look for, trade, and find things from your neighbors for free!)



rosemary



mint



chives



thyme

# Herbs

## Decide What to Grow

*If you're new to growing, basil and/or mint are good plants to start with.*

Make sure whatever plant you decide to grow is a dwarf variety - you should be okay with any of the herbs. The easiest to grow are:

- Basil (though not on a window ledge - they like warmth)\*\*
- Chives
- Cilantro\*
- Dill\*
- Lemon Balm\*\*
- Lemongrass
- Mint (Peppermint is easier than spearmint)\*\*
- Parsley (If growing from seed, soak in water first to crack the coat)
- Rosemary
- Thyme

Herbs that might be more of a challenge include:

- Marjoram
- Oregano\*\*
- Sage
- Stevia\*\*

You could also try microgreens and/or sprouts.

\*- plant does not grow back after clipping so it needs to be constantly replanted (not the best for a window or indoor garden)

\*\* - best herbs to grow from a cutting (see "Growing from a Cutting")

# Grow It!

You can grow from seed, from cuttings, or by using a starter plant. It's best not to bring in plants or starters from outdoors - it's much harder for plants to adapt to being indoors if they were started outdoors. Also, you greatly reduce the risk of bringing in any pests.

## ***Growing from Seed***

If growing from seed, you can start your plant in a small container like an old egg carton or cleaned and disinfected yogurt cup. When the herb is 2-4 inches high, transplant it to a pot 6-12 inches deep and at least 6 inches wide. It may take a couple months before you have any herbs to harvest so patience is needed.

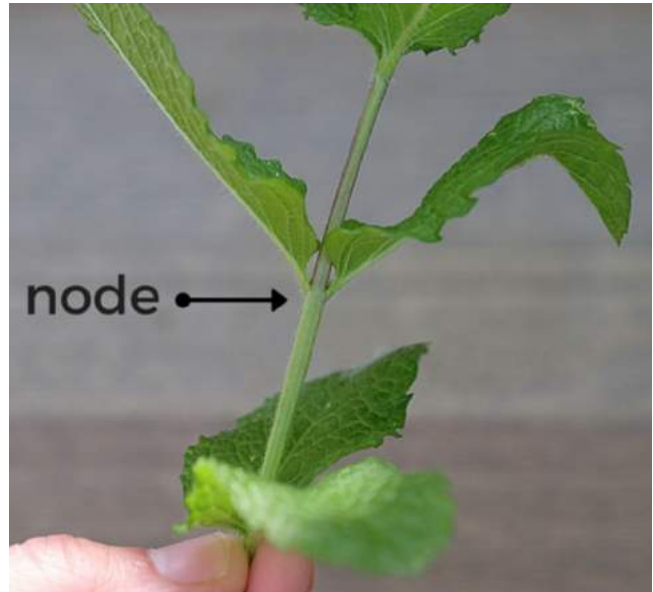
Fill each container with damp organic potting mix to about 1 inch from the rim. Sprinkle 3 - 5 seeds on top of the soil. Cover the seeds with a dusting of potting mix and pat down gently. Cover with a plastic bag, to retain moisture. (See *Growing from Starter Plant* section below for more tips.)

For more detailed instructions, visit The Spruce's guide on starting from seed indoors. (<https://www.thespruce.com/successful-start-seed-indoors-1402478>)



## ***Growing from a Cutting***

Soft stemmed plants such as basil and mint grow easily from a cutting. All you need is a four to six inch piece of the herb from another plant, some water, and a glass jar (or container). Dark glass is preferred. Cut at an angle, just below the part where two leaves meet the stem - this is called the node. Remove all leaves from the bottom 2/3 of the clipping.



You can use a cutting from your own plant or a neighbors (get permission please!) Your best option is to use a cutting from another plant that was grown indoors.

Plant the cutting in soil once it's sprouted roots 2" or longer. Soil is preferable, but if that isn't possible, you can keep the plants in water. Just make sure to change the water frequently.

Even though you only need to snip a bit of the herb and put it in water, there are several best practices, so please visit Learning Herbs (<https://learningherbs.com/skills/herbs-from-cuttings/>) for detailed information on best ways to grow herbs in water or watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVjCh28QYsA> to learn how to root and plant basil.

### ***Growing from Starter Plant***

You can find starter plants at your local gardening store or even at some grocery stores. Try to avoid big box stores and go to a local gardening center or store. This isn't the most populated site, but check out Local Grown Plants ([www.localgrownplants.com/find/](http://www.localgrownplants.com/find/)) for locally owned garden centers in your area.

The starter plant doesn't always come in a pot either - Whole Foods O Organics brand sells living basil in a flat plastic container. When you open the lid, the full root bulb is still intact. You can take it home and plant it. Grocery stores also often have actual plants of basil. In addition, if you root a cutting in water (like with basil), it will become a starter plant that you can put into soil.



## **Light**

Light is the most important part of growing herbs - the flavor depends on the quality and quantity of light the plant gets. If you can't get direct sunlight, full spectrum LED grow lights are the best option. (Full spectrum plasma LEDs are the best but are very expensive.)

Additionally:

- The plants need 12-16 hours a day of full spectrum lighting.
- Do not go over 16 hours because they also need at least 8 hours of darkness for proper photosynthesis.
- Place lights 6-8 inches above the plants. You can move the light even closer if you'd like - it's very hard to burn plants with LED lighting.
- There are many types of full spectrum LED lights to choose from either online or at a local gardening/hardware/home store. We suggest you look for LED full spectrum grow lights with a desk clip, flexible gooseneck and timer. You can find them for around \$30.



- LED lights do not get hot which is one great reason to use them. Looking for 'grow' lights will also ensure the light has the full spectrum the plants need.
- You can get lights with a timer or purchase a timer for under \$10. The timer plugs into the wall, and you plug the light into the timer. Using a timer takes away any worry about enough or too much light.

If you really don't want to think about it, you can also purchase herb garden kits that include the planters, lights, timer, self watering mechanism, growing medium and seeds. If you absolutely have to, it's okay, but we suggest you just buy the grow lights. You want to grow your plants in soil for optimum nutrition (the kits we reviewed tended to be hydroponic or had a special growing medium - not soil). You also want terra cotta pots to plant them in. A grow light alone gives you more options.

If you're worried about the initial cost of setting up an indoor herb garden, think long term. Not only will you have amazing fresh herbs literally at your fingertips, you'll save money over time if you factor in the cost each time you buy herbs.

## The Pot

When using a starter plant, start with a 6 - 12 inch pot. If you're unsure, go for a bigger size - the more room oxygen has to flow around the plant, the faster it will grow.

### ***Tips for choosing the right pot:***

- Make sure the pot has a drainage hole at the bottom. This is very important. Putting a small piece of screen or even coffee filter over the drainage hole can help keep soil in the pot.

- Terra Cotta is the preferred material because it breathes, allowing more oxygen into the plants roots. If you use plastic or another material that doesn't breathe, you might not need to water the plant as much.
- Be careful with the saucer - if it's terra cotta, make sure it's coated so water doesn't absorb through or make sure to put another waterproof saucer under it so you don't ruin your shelf.
- To give even better drainage, put pebbles in the saucer (NOT the pot, but in the saucer. Pebbles in the pot can worsen drainage.)



- As mentioned, use a 6 inch pot minimum - 6 inches wide and 6 inches deep. If you are planting more than one plant in the pot, opt for a larger size, like 12 inch. Do not plant too many plants in one pot - the roots can overgrow and suffocate the plants.
- Best practice is to only plant 1 type of herb in a pot. For example, 3 basil plants in a 12" wide and 10" deep (or more) pot will work well. Otherwise, you might suffocate the roots and slow down growth.



## Soil

- Do not use soil from outside. It's most likely too heavy and compact and can smother roots. It could also bring in pests or fungus.
- Use organic potting soil. This can be tricky because the term "organic" on the package doesn't mean it's certified organic - soil cannot be certified. But, you can search the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) page - <https://www.omri.org/ubersearch> - to see what potting soils are used to grow organic food. Simply type "potting soil" into the search bar.
- Good air circulation is important in order to keep fungus away so you need to keep the plants in a room with good air circulation, such as most any room in your house (but not the closets).

## Planting

- Add 2-3" of potting soil into the pot.
- Remove the plant from its original pot and loosen the roots.
- Place it in the new container with the roots flared out.
- Finish filling with the potting mix, then gently pat down the soil. If you pack the soil too hard, the roots won't be able to spread out and will affect plant growth.
- Water immediately after patting down soil. Do not overwater.
- Leave a 1" space at the top of the pot.



*Visit [OMRI.org](https://www.omri.org) to find potting soil used by organic growers.*

## Watering

- You need to learn to read your plants. This will take a little time, but you'll soon understand how your plant is feeling and if it needs water. Until then...
- Try the finger test. If you put your finger into the soil an inch or two (not on top) and it's damp, do not water. If it's dry, then water.
- Always water the soil around the herb—never water over the leaves (unless you are flushing salts or aphids from them). This could promote mildew and disease.
- Water enough to fill an amount 1/3 of the pot the herb is in.
- Make sure the water is room temperature.
- If your water runs out into the saucer, keep it there for 1 hour. After an hour, discard any remaining water from the saucer.
- Watch the plant. If the leaves start drooping, they most likely need water. Test the soil.
- Yellow leaves mean you're watering too often. The most common way plants die is by overwatering.
- If you're ever unsure, it's probably better to err on the side of not watering. Plants do not like too much - which is why drainage is so important.

# Fertilizer

- Herbs don't need much fertilizer. Too much can cause too many leaves and less flavor.
- If you choose to fertilize, a weak seaweed fertilizer every couple of weeks is fine. Just make sure the fertilizer is water soluble. Use a fine mist and spray on both sides of the plant leaves until water drips off - plants absorb fertilizer better through their leaves. Applying seaweed fertilizer this way can help protect the plants. (This type of fertilization is called foliar feeding and is a bit controversial among gardeners, though it will work well.)
- Seaweed has various micronutrients and provides many benefits to your plants. Kelp is usually the main form used. You can make your own if you have access to kelp - just put some in water and cover with an airtight lid. Let stand for a few weeks or months. Warning - it will smell bad.
- Alternatively, you can buy liquid kelp fertilizer, just make sure you buy an organic product. It's important the seaweed is not processed with heat or high pressure, or contain toxic chemicals like potassium hydroxide and sodium hydroxide. You also want seaweed that is sustainably harvested. We do not endorse products, but Neptune's Harvest seaweed fertilizer kept popping up in our research.



- Even though it might seem simplest, we suggest you not use Miracle Gro products from Scott's - they might have a couple items certified through OMRI, but they are the exclusive licensee for Monsanto's RoundUp (glyphosate) and are one of the companies that sell products with ingredients like glyphosate, dicamba and atrazine. As of July 2019, there were over 18,000 lawsuits against Monsanto and glyphosate. Scott's is the exclusive agent to market and promote Monsanto's RoundUp. Please do some research and decide for yourself.
- If you forget to fertilize, don't worry. Simply skip that week or month and get back to your regular schedule the next time. Too much fertilizer can cause excess nitrogen and salts which could harm the plants, so you don't want to over-fertilize.
- If you want extra credit and are very enthusiastic, you can give your plants a good wash in the sink every month or couple of months to get any salt buildup out of the soil. Run water over the plant and allow excess water to drain out. Wash the plant again. When it has finished draining, return it to your window or shelf. This will flush out any salts or buildup in the soil.



# Pruning

- Prune your herbs. This is the best - and fastest - way to grow full plants. By cutting off parts of the plant, it signals more growth. And, obviously, eat the herbs you've just pruned!
- Do not prune back more than 1/3 of the plant at a time. (Leave 2/3 of the plant.) Also, do not prune until the plant is 6 inches tall.
- Pinch or snip the herbs starting at the top of the plant, making sure to cut clean through the stems. Do not crush them. Cut 1/4 " or 1/2 inch above the leaves.



- Pruning is different from getting a cutting for a starter plant. When pruning, cut just above where the leaves meet the stem so those leaves will grow out into a bushier plant. (For starter cuttings for new plants - say basil plants - you snip just below where the leaves meet the stem and remove stems at the bottom before putting into water.)
- Trim back your herbs so they don't flower. Once that happens, the plant's energy goes into the flowers, not the taste of your herbs, so make sure to pinch off any flower buds you might see sprouting.

- If you want the plants to grow, do not prune more than one third of the plant.
- You can find more pruning tips at <http://www.urbancultivator.net/prune-herbs-gardening-result/>

# Plant Care

- Consider how humid your environment is. Plants love humidity, so if you live in a dry area, line a tray with stones and fill to the top of the stones. Place the herb containers in the tray, making sure not to submerge the plants.
- If the plants are growing longer stems and fewer leaves, they're not getting enough light and are stretching to find more.
- If the leaves are turning yellow, you are overwatering.
- If you see brown spots on the plants, that usually means they're too close to the lights, but this is rare if you use LED lights.
- If you find you have pests, they are usually aphids. Simply put your pot into the sink and run water over it - that should wash them off. If you want to do more, you could spray neem oil or insecticidal soap. You can make your own soap easily by combining one cup of any variety oil (vegetable, corn, etc) with one tablespoon of dishwashing liquid. Just make sure to avoid any washing liquid that contains degreaser, bleach or is for an automatic dishwasher. Mix two teaspoons of the mix with one cup of warm water. Add to a spray bottle and spray away.
- If you're still unsure, take a photo or put one or two pests in a sealed container and take to your local nursery or garden store.



## Tidbits

- “Annuals” are plants that grow once - they are best grown from seed.
- “Perennials” regrow over multiple years - these are best grown from parts of existing plants. Examples include sage, rosemary, lavender, mint, and thyme.
- Want your plants to inspire you? Write motivational messages like “You Grow, Girl!” on chalkboard centerpiece sticks or message pops!



If you'd like more information, watch this instructional video on growing herbs from Garden Answer - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOcmVmR8ziE>

## Happy Growing!



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