

Spice up your garden; plant a plot of herbs

Herbs can add as much zest to the vegetable or flower garden as they can to meals.

Used in foods for thousands of years, herbs are becoming more popular among today's home gardeners. Heightened interest in diet variety and nutrition is one reason.

"Herbs also offer attractive leaf textures, colorful foliage and pungent aromas," said Beverly Anderson, a herb expert at Michigan State University.

Herbs can be grown with vegetables or flowers, on a sunny window sill or in a container on the patio. But because herbs need certain growing conditions to thrive, many do not do well indoors.

"It's a continual challenge to create the right environment, and this may discourage the beginning herb gardener," Anderson, a veteran herb grower, said.

"Herbs need plenty of sunning to develop the oils that create the scent of the plants," Anderson said. "Few herbs do well in shade."

Fertile, well drained soil is critical to herb growth. Commercial fertilizers are not usually needed except for herbs that are clipped many times, such as chives or parsley. Too much fertilizer can lessen the flavor of herbs that are used in cooking.

ANDERSON RECOMMENDS that the

beginning herb gardener start with thyme, basil, parsley, chives and sage. They are easy to grow from seed.

"Mint grows easily from seed, but it's better to start mint from root divisions. The roots spread very fast, so it's important that they have plenty of space," Anderson said. "A problem most beginning herb gardeners have is that they do not leave enough room for plant growth and, as a result, the plants do poorly."

To avoid such problems, Anderson suggests that the beginning herb gardener take time to research the plants' growth habits. Many books are available on herb gardening at book stores and libraries.

Herbs are harvested in a variety of ways. Some are cut as needed, such as parsley or chives. Rosemary and lavender are harvested when the tips are in full bloom. Anise and sweet fennel should be clipped when the plants start to flower.

Most herbs are preserved by drying. Dry by tying plants in loose bundles and hanging upside down in a cool, rust-free, airy area. A wooden frame with screen or cheesecloth stretched over it would also serve to dry the herbs. Make sure heat, especially sunlight, does not reach the drying herbs or their quality may be impaired. Dried herbs should be stored in tightly covered, moisture-free jars.

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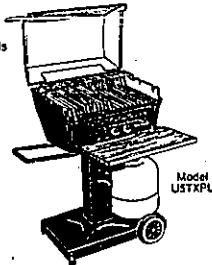
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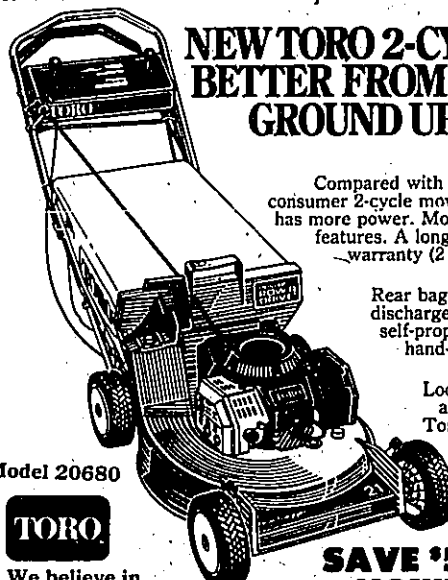
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