

Winter Herbs

by Anne-Marie Walker

When asked why plant an herb garden, I am quick to respond Thoreau may have put it best; “If the day and night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs ... that is your success.”

Our temperate, Mediterranean climate affords a particular pleasure; the ability to grow many herbs year round in our Bay Area gardens. While growth rates in winter may slow, most perennial herbs thrive during our relatively mild winters. Nothing brightens a winter day better than a little handful of fragrant herbs as garniture to a soup, brewed in a tisane or added to salads, sauces and stews. You may not have lived until you have tasted a sage leaf fried in olive oil! Long after consumption, the lingering fragrance of herbs in your winter kitchen will recall the largesse of summer’s sweet bounty. And, when you glance out your kitchen window, you cannot overlook the beauty herbs add to the garden in winter. Look at the striking lushness of herbs in this photo; a border of oregano, purple sage and pelargonium thrive in the foreground with *Melissa officinalis*, also a culinary sage, abounding in the background.

Historically, herbs have long been valued to enhance aroma and taste. After cold winters devoid of fresh greens, the first spring shoots of herbs such as sorrel, borage, purslane and dandelion were eagerly awaited. To grow herbs in a winter garden, first select herbs that can handle winter’s assault; reduced sunlight, cooler temperatures and rain. In the Bay Area, a list of winter herbs can certainly include marjoram, mint, oregano, sage, thyme, winter savory and lemon balm, a delightful addition to salads, soups and marmalades. You may of course also succeed with parsley (a true biennial), rosemary and two tender perennials chives and tarragon. With these last two, expect a six week period of dormancy.

There are few rules for growing herbs. Plant the herbs in well drained soil; a 50/50 mix of potting soil and perlite works well. Resist the urge to fertilize because it encourages lush growth at the expense of taste. Harvest herbs as needed in the morning before the warmth of the sun draws out essential oils. Lastly, perennials such as mint, marjoram, lemon balm and winter savory benefit from cutting back. Parsley will need to be replaced after the second year. Oregano, sage, and thyme should be dug up in the spring every third year and after cutting the root ball into two or three pieces, replant.

Winter herbs greatly complement fall and winter crops such as radicchio and kale. Next time you want to brighten up your winter day, try this simple winter caprese salad. Layer alternately four ounces of mozzarella and a head of red radicchio (leaves separated) and top with a chiffonade of kale (1 leaf with rib discarded and sliced thinly). Top with ½ cup of roasted hazelnuts coarsely chopped. Zest one orange over the dish and sprinkle with herbed sea salt -50/50 mix of chopped fresh oregano, thyme and sage and sea salt. Drizzle with olive oil and serve. You’ll be hooked growing herbs all winter long!