

Herb Garden Diary



The Purple Gate Farm Newsletter

August 2009

Our Herb Garden Diary Newsletter explores herbal knowledge, practical garden information with historical insight and current research to reveal the delight and enrichment of life by the growing and using of herbs. We explore the seasons in our south central Texas gardens and share our gardening experiences in this environment.

Quick Fixes

When we are tired of the bland, one-flavor-fits-all prepared, packaged or frozen foods that have become a solution in our busy lives, we stand in long, noisy lines for hours waiting to be seated at an expensive restaurant hoping to get the flavorful foods we crave. Have you ever stood in those lines after a harrowing day and wondered if there was another way to live? Would you rather be at home with your shoes off, listening to your favorite music or exchanging the day's events with your loved ones while inhaling enticing scents from the kitchen? Sounds too good to be true? Well it is easier than you think.

To turn a bland meal into a memorable tasty meal you can use dried herbs easily found in any grocery store or purchase fresh herbs from the produce section. The best and least expensive way to have plenty of herbs on hand is to grow them in a garden or in small container planters. Fresh herbs are my personal favorites, but if I don't have a particular herb available in the garden, I use dried herbs from the grocery store.

You can grow enough herbs to cook for a family of four year-round with a few plants each of perennial herbs like thyme, oregano, rosemary, winter savory, many mints and chives. We are fortunate here in south-central Texas since many perennials stay green all winter outside in the garden. (Do not forget to occasionally water evergreen and perennial herbs left outside for the winter.) These perennials are much milder in winter than in summer so it is necessary to use a bit more of these fresh herbs for proper seasoning. Let your personal taste be your guide.

Basil, marjoram, parsley, and cilantro are some of the favorite annual herbs. If you want annuals year round you must plant them in containers, cut the flowers off when they appear and bring the plants indoors for the winter. We were surprised last year when we kept removing the flowers of basil and cilantro into the fall. Both basil and cilantro continued to grow until January when we had a real cold spell for several days (17°F). To be sure you have winter fresh herbs, play it safe and plant a selection into

containers and move them indoors when the weather turns cold. Plants grown in containers stay healthy and produce leaves for your winter dishes if they get enough light (a south facing window is ideal). These plants do not require a lot of room to grow so they fit nicely into containers, turn them to the sun a few times during the winter to be sure to expose the plants to enough light. You can then harvest what you need as you need it and get the freshest, richest flavor for your dishes. It is best not to harvest more than one-third of a plant each time, so allow enough plants, especially those you use most frequently.

Once you have insured your winter supply of fresh herbs here are a few "quick fixes" for using them. You don't have to be a gourmet cook to take advantage of this kitchen harvest. Because packaged prepared foods often are made to please just about everybody, the flavorings are often bland. The convenience of packaged, prepared or frozen foods are not to be ignored. Packaged pizza that seems a little flat can be made flavorful by simply adding a tablespoon of chopped fresh thyme, oregano, rosemary or basil to them after removing them from the oven. Prepared sauces can also benefit from a little addition of any combination of fresh herbs that your family enjoys. Chives, basil, parsley, tarragon, rosemary, marjoram and garlic can be mixed into butters a day ahead either singly or in combination. Place the herb butter in the refrigerator to allow the flavors to blend. Herb butters add variety and zest to toasted breads, croutons, baked or mashed potatoes or frozen vegetables.

Herbal vinegars and oil can add zest to prepared salad mixes. They are simple to make and often expensive to buy. Simply put a handful of your favorite herb or combination of herbs into a jar. Fill the jar ½ full of white vinegar and fill the remainder with a good table wine. Any wine good enough to drink can be used. You can adjust the proportions of wine and vinegar to your taste. Heating the vinegar and wine mixture over low heat for a few minutes will evaporate the alcohol from the liquid but retain the flavor of the wine. (If you are making herb oils, fill the jar almost to the top with extra virgin olive oil or vegetable oil.)

Let the mixture sit in a warm place for a few days. Place the jar where you can easily pick it up in the kitchen. From time to time shake the bottle lightly as you pass it. This puts the liquids in contact with all the herbs in the jar. Strain away the herb leaves and sample the flavor. If it is not as strong as you would like, add more herbs and let stand again. Experiment with small quantities until you have the exactly satisfying herbal blend you have been looking for. Now you can offer herb vinegars and oils to your family and friends when serving meals as a "specialty of the house." (One or two of these vinegars make a wonderful, personal Christmas gift or a hostess gift.)

Herb Pesto are also easy and rewarding to make and serve. Basil is a favorite, but today other herb Pesto are popular. Thyme, oregano and other herbs are often substituted for the basil. Here is a basic pesto recipe:

CLASSIC BASIL PESTO

2 cups fresh basil leaves
2 large garlic cloves
½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
¼ cup pine nuts or walnuts
½ cup olive oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Combine the basil, garlic, Parmesan cheese and nuts in a food processor or blender. With the machine running, slowly add the olive oil. Season to taste with salt and freshly ground pepper and process to the desired consistency. Let stand 5 minutes before serving. This will keep in the refrigerator for several days. It may turn dark but the flavor remains strong.

You can prepare herb Pesto and freeze them for future use. Just leave out the garlic and Parmesan and add them when the mixture is thawed. Do not thaw in the microwave. It will cook and be mushy with an unpleasant taste. Allow to thaw at room temperature.

Herb Pesto mixed in tomato sauce and poured over baked or fried meat or fish make a moist compliment that is delicious. Rub pesto onto meats before cooking to soak the rich flavors into chicken, pork or beef. Rub pesto on the meat or vegetable and close tightly in a plastic bag a day ahead as a marinade for cooking on the grill. These simple steps turn ordinary foods into memorable meals.

Any selection of herbs sprinkled onto canned soups add richness that can rival made-from-scratch soups. Chopped fresh basil is wonderful sprinkled on tomato soup just before serving. With a little experimenting and experience, I am certain you can come up with herb mixtures that your family will request often. It is easy to get so involved with the fun of creating that you forget to Keep Notes. (That delicious combination will surely need to be repeated!)

All prepared foods can and probably should be enhanced with herbal mixtures for the quick fixes I am recommending. The added herbs fill the kitchen with delicious aromas and create anticipation for the coming meal. Remember, you are at home, not in a noisy line waiting for an empty table at a restaurant.

While you are waiting for the flavors to develop and the food to cook pamper yourself with the following quick fix refreshing facial:

Spring-Green Summer Facial

**1 cucumber, peeled
and seeded**
**1 cup lemon basil,
leaves only**
**2 egg whites, whipped
to soft peaks**

Place cucumber and lemon basil in a blender or food processor. Puree until smooth. Quickly fold in egg whites. Apply to the face, avoiding the eyes, for 5-8 minutes. Lie down, put your feet up. Wash off the facial with tepid water. Apply skin cream or moisturizer.

Facial Recipe from Herbnet
<http://www.herbnet.com/> (1998)

©) Mary H. Mills 2002

The Purple Gate Herb Farm

7376 County Road 309

Caldwell, TX 77836

email: pgherbfarm@aol.com

Webpage: pgherbfarm.com