

Herbs Where Its Hot

It is commonly called the 'lavender lament' – that all too common cry from gardeners in warm, humid regions complaining that their lavender bushes do not grow and flower as well as they would like. There are strategies for improving the performance of Mediterranean herbs in tropical and subtropical climates, but warm climate gardeners can grow an impressive range of other herbs that make them the envy of their southern counterparts.

Imagine having a year round supply of garden fresh, culinary herbs such as ginger, galangal, lemon grass, basil, turmeric, bay and Kaffir lime leaves. These and many other herbs thrive in warm climates. Preparation, position and propagation are the keys to growing herbs successfully in humid regions.

© Annette McFarlane



Preparing to Plant

Put the same effort into preparing your herb garden as you would in preparing an area to grow vegetables. Incorporate plenty of compost and well decomposed animal manure. In regions with high summer rainfall it is particularly important to incorporate plenty of organic material. This helps to open up and increase the air spaces within the soil. It also provides the bulk needed to build up the soil above that of the surrounding area and facilitate improved drainage.

Get the Balance Right

Be sure to check and adjust the soil pH to accommodate the species of herbs to be grown. This is something that is often neglected by gardeners. Many herbs prefer slightly alkaline conditions. The soil in coastal tropical and subtropical areas tend to be acidic and you may need to add wood ash or lime more regularly than would normally be required for other garden plants.

Keep Them Growing

Remember that herbs grow quickly and have a high demand for nutrients when they are being regularly harvested. Don't be afraid to harvest your herbs, just be sure to allow your plants to develop to a reasonable size before beginning to remove leaves, stem or tubers. Adjust the amount of the plant harvested according to the growth it supports, avoiding completely defoliating the entire plant at any one time. Keep the growth of your herbs strong and increase resistance to fungal and bacterial diseases by applying soluble organic seaweed fertiliser or home made comfrey fertiliser each week.

Perfectly Positioned

Group your herbs together according to their preferred climate, soil type and position. Here are some examples:

Hot, Dry with Neutral to Alkaline Soil

Mediterranean herbs such as thyme, lavender, rosemary, oregano enjoy this environment as do catmint and aloe vera. Think of those impossible garden beds that always seem to be dry because they are protected by the eaves of the building. What could be more ideal for these dry climate herbs?

Damp, Semi Shaded with Neutral to Acid Soil

Herbs such as lemon balm, mint, comfrey, watercress, chervil, annual coriander and salad burnett prefer a little protection. Choose positions with filtered light or garden beds that are sheltered from the hot afternoon sun.

Moist, Well Drained in Full Sun

Basil, lemon grass, ginger, chilli, chives, parsley, bay, rocket, feverfew, dandelion, yarrow and Kaffir lime thrive in full sun. They need regular watering, but demand good drainage.

Go potty

Grey foliaged Mediterranean herbs such as lavender and sage should be grown in terracotta pots. Not only will this provide them with improved drainage, but they can be moved about the garden according to the season. Place them out in the baking sun during the drier months, and shelter them from torrential downpours during the wet.

Place pots on or against light coloured backgrounds such as terracotta tiles or painted concrete walls. Avoid placing pots close to pools or other water features.

These plants typically grow in slightly alkaline conditions, so remember to provide regular applications of dolomite lime or wood ash. Rather than just applying it to the soil, sprinkle directly over the foliage. The fine hairs that give plants a grey appearance help to trap moisture close to the surface of the leaves. This is a great attribute in a dry climate, but is disastrous in humid regions.

Sprinkling an alkaline material over the foliage about four times during the most humid period of the year helps to keep the foliage dry. Try it on lavender, sage, rosemary and curry plants (*Helichrysum angustifolium*). The effect is quite dramatic. Within a day or two you will observe plants standing more erect and generally looking more robust. This technique works well for any grey foliaged plant grown in humid areas.

Care with mulch

Mulch the tops of the pots with a layer of coarse, white, washed river sand. The sand retains some moisture on the surface of the soil without creating excess humidity underneath the foliage and around the base of the stem. The white sand actually reflects sunlight up through the inside foliage of the plant, helping to reduce the humidity.

Propagate or Perish

The terms annual and perennial used in most books describe the habit a plant when grown in its country of origin. Gardeners in warm climates delight in the fact that so called 'annual' salvias behave as perennials, yet cry foul when 'perennial' herbs don't last the distance.



Become a Seed Saver

Learn to collect seed of short-lived plants such as sweet basil, borage, coriander, fennel, parsley, feverfew, calendula and echinacea. Sow small amounts of seed regularly.

Adjust your planting schedule to better accommodate the needs of your plants. Herbs such as coriander and dill are intolerant of heat and humidity, but grow well if sown during late autumn and winter. Search out the cool, shaded areas of your garden for these and other tender herbs.

Take a Cutting

Never allow your plants to get too woody before you have managed to take a few tip cuttings. Always have some young plants coming on to replace those that become old and weak. Learn how to take cuttings of Greek and Thai basil, salvia and sage so that the premature death of a plant is not such a tragedy.

Spice Up Your Life

Growing your own ginger, galangal and turmeric is as simple as calling in to your local organic fruit and vegetable outlet and purchasing some propagation material. Look for older sections, avoiding pieces that show any signs of damage or rot. You can often find rhizomes that have already begun to shoot. Plant out into prepared garden beds or pots. Be patient and avoid over watering. Plants take 4-6 weeks to shoot and small pieces of the fresh rhizome can be harvested from the parent plant after about three to four months. Don't waste the small, knobby pieces of root herbs that are too small to peel, save them for replanting.

In some cases you may have to learn to substitute other species for plants you have difficulty growing. If your garlic cloves rot off over summer, plant and harvest them earlier and substitute garlic chives when they are out of season. If your coriander goes to seed during the summer heat, plant the more perennial, but equally delicious Mexican coriander (*Eryngium foetidum*). Winter tarragon (*Tagetes lucida*) is virtually unkillable and makes an adequate substitute when French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) refuses to survive.

What is a Herb Spiral?

Creating a herb spiral involves planting herbs in a spiral pattern on a raised circular mound. Do herbs grow better in circles? Who knows? What I am convinced of, is that many herbs appreciate the improved drainage afforded by building up the soil. Plants that need absolutely perfect drainage should be established towards the top of the mound and those needing more moisture planted at the base.

Scented Geraniums

Flowering geraniums and pelargoniums are plagued by rust and other fungus diseases in warm climates. Surprisingly, a myriad of scented geraniums can be grown with ease and are largely unaffected by the problems that plague their purely ornamental counterparts.

Liquid Comfrey

Comfrey is renowned for its ability to speed the healing of broken bones, but is also an invaluable addition to the compost heap and makes a great, trace element enriched, liquid manure. Fill a large bucket with as many comfrey leaves as you can harvest. Cover with water, weighting down the leaves if necessary and covering to prevent mosquitoes breeding. Stir the mix vigorously each day for two to three weeks. The resultant, rather smelly brew can be diluted to the colour of weak tea and used as an organic liquid fertiliser over other herbs, vegetables and garden plants.

