

The Evergreen Herbs

Debbie Moore Clark

As a long-time herbalist, I am frequently asked how I harvest, preserve and store herbs for out-of-season use. In answering this frequent question, I'm happy to respond that some herbs—those that are truly evergreen and also those that are essentially evergreen—need not be preserved or stored as they may be cut and used year round. Most sources I consulted list bay, juniper, lavender, rosemary, sage and thyme as the evergreen herbs. However, I believe, under the right conditions and in certain USDA growing zones, this list may be bolstered with the addition of betony, germander, mahonia, parsley and rue.

Variable weather may certainly affect the health and quality of some of the evergreen herbs to some degree or another, good or bad. Harsh winters, extremely hot and humid summers, and overly wet seasons may all take a negative toll. However, there still remains a good-sized group of common herbs that are either truly evergreen or essentially evergreen in that they stay in leaf, green and useful all year. I write from the prospective of a gardener whose garden is located in the USDA's growing zones 7b-8a of the Southern Piedmont. My little garden is categorized zone 8a.

Truly an evergreen herb, Bay, *Laurus nobilis*, offers the cook or crafter an endless supply of shiny, dark green leaves. Hardy in zone 8, this aromatic, evergreen tree may be planted into the landscape in Charlotte, but is easily and beautifully grown in large containers; it may be limbed up into standard shape or allowed to bush at the preference of the gardener. I've come to prefer bay leaves fresh to dried, so tripping outside in winter from the kitchen to the garden to snip a few leaves is commonplace at my house. If your bay tree grows in a pot not too large to move, your leaves will most likely suffer less winter scorch and die-back if located in a somewhat protected, but sunny, environment. I have three trees in pots and all remain outside all the time. Once the threat of frost has passed in spring, I simply prune out any poorly-weathered leaves or branches affected with winter die-back and we're good to go.

Betony, *Stachys officinalis*, commonly known as Lamb's Ear, is a plant I grow ornamentally. I love the look of its soft and fuzzy blue to greenish-white leaves in the garden, which I also enjoy petting (soft as a lamb's ear) and using in the making of tussie-mussies. However, according to Rodale's *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs*, the herb also holds medicinal-culinary uses as tea: “. . . try an occasional cup simply for pleasure—the next time it snows, for example. Betony makes a fine substitute for regular black tea. Try blending it with other dried herbs” (43). Betony is hardy in zone 4, but I know it stretches this limit.

The evergreen herb Germander, *Teucrium chamaedrys*, is a beautiful alternative to boxwood. Hardy in zones 5-9, germander is often seen as clipped miniature hedges edging Elizabethan-style knot gardens. The glossy, dark green leaves of germander look similar to boxwood and lend themselves especially well as edging plants for herb garden designs. Pruning, which encourages branching, should be done in spring after the threat of frost has passed, although delicate pruning may be done to maintain shape when used decoratively as edging plants.



I rarely think of Juniper, *Juniperus communis*, as an herb, but it is! Hardy in all zones, most suburban gardeners probably think of the junipers as simply landscape plants. But their uses go beyond the landscape. Junipers offer medicinal, culinary and ornamental uses. One of the reasons this group of plants is so well loved for landscaping is because junipers are truly evergreen. Their needle-shaped leaves, reddish-brown bark and sticky oils provide a characteristically pleasant balsam-like scent.

Lavender, *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead' in the Garden of Debbie Moore Clark, May 17, 2012. Used with permission.

Hardy in zones 5-8, Lavender, *Lavandula angustifolia* is another aromatic herb with evergreen foliage. The beautiful blue-green foliage of lavender is scented just as beautifully, only more subtly, as the herb's cherished flowers. During harsh winters, lavender foliage will not be as attractive as during spring months, but it is nonetheless evergreen. I have learned to judiciously prune my lavender shrubs in early spring to remove stray growth and winter damage, and again after bloom in mid-summer to remove spent flower spikes and to shape into mounds. This bi-annual mounding keeps shrub

growth intact and works well to prevent or at least greatly reduce woodiness and misshapen lopsided plants as they age. The technique works well for me. When you remove the unwanted foliage, don't eat it, however. Only the flowers, fresh or dried, are safely edible. Lavender stems root easily in soil during the warm months, so use some of the pruned foliage to start new plants.

Did you know Oregon Grape, *Mahonia aquifolium* is an herb? Frankly, I was surprised to learn this amazing landscape plant is useful beyond ornamentation. Hardy in zone 6, mahonia has medicinal uses: "Its bitter-tasting root is one of the most versatile of Native American herbs" (404). I grow mahonia for its year-round beauty in the garden: holly like and shiny evergreen foliage; clusters of fragrant yellow spring flowers; and deep purple berries in summer. Beyond mahonia's medicinal and ornamental uses, yellow and tan dyes may be gleaned from the plant's roots, stems and leaves (405). Additionally, "The fruit yields a purplish blue color to wool mordanted with alum" (405).

Mahonia aquifolium 'Winter Sun' in the Garden of Debbie Moore Clark, December 8, 2011. Used with permission.



Parsley, *Petroselinum crispum*, whether Italian flat or curly leaf, is another herb that keeps going year long. The herb is hardy in zone 9. Thanks to a wren couple that lived in and worked my herb garden this past year, I had beautiful, leafy green parsley all summer and fall, and throughout the mild winter of 2012. The songful duo picked off nearly every butterfly caterpillar, which normally defoliate my crop. When my crop is defoliated, nothing rankles me more than to purchase a bunch of fresh cut parsley at the grocery for \$4 when the same amount of money can take me through a year of cooking with one plant. My custom is to usually put out 7 new plants each spring to insure the butterflies and I both get some fresh parsley. Depending upon the voracity of the butterfly population, that approach sometimes works, sometimes not. But when the wrens are active and the winter is mild, there can be an abundance of fresh parsley year round. However, even in the coldest winters it's still possible to have fresh parsley, although the crop may not be as plentiful. I've had friends boast of cutting fresh parsley in the snow! Because parsley is a biennial that bolts (goes to seed) the second year, I pull out my plants in spring and put in new ones.

One of the more obvious evergreen herbs is Rosemary, *Rosemarinus officinalis*, at least in growing zones 8-10 where it is considered hardy. Except for using it chopped and dried in a favorite seasoning blend, I have no need to dry it, especially since I prefer rosemary fresh, straight from the garden—be it winter, spring, summer or fall. 'Arp' is a particularly winter-hardy variety I grew when I lived in a colder environment in Virginia (Zone 7a). But here in Charlotte, NC, I grow 'Salem' as my primary culinary variety. So far, I've never suffered a winter that has killed it. As with real estate, "location is everything," so in a protected spot in the garden, rosemary should fare well year after aromatic year. Fresh rosemary, beyond its use as a piney aromatic culinary herb works well into fresh holiday arrangements.

Rue, *Ruta graveolens*, is an evergreen perennial subshrub, which means the stems are woody, but the plant is herbaceous farther up. The plant is hardy in zones 4-9. Personally, I do not grow rue, so I have no experience with this herb's curious and distinctive fragrance and its bitter taste. *Rodale's* warns that the oil "has the odd power of photosensitizing the skin of some people, causing small water blisters to break out" (433). While rue touts a long history of medicinal, ornamental and craft use, "Rue is grown in many herb gardens for its historical interest as well as its striking blue-green foliage" (435). Adding blue-green foliage to the garden is a worthwhile endeavor.

Sage, *Salvia officinalis*, is one of my favorite herbs, although my love affair with this pungent and earthy perennial subshrub came late. I've come to absolutely love sage's distinctive and savory camphor like aroma and taste. Each spring and fall, I put out more plants because I have difficulty growing the edible salvias in Charlotte's heat and humidity. For these reasons, I'm more likely to lose a plant in summer than winter. But if your sage plants make it unscathed through the dog days of summer, you'll have sage through the colder months as it remains hardy zones 4-8. Yes, leaves may toughen and the plant will likely slow its growth and leaf production, but you will still have culinary sage visible in the garden. In my Zone 8a garden, Mexican Bush Sage, *Salvia leucantha*, Pineapple Sage, *S. elegans*, Clary Sage, *S. sclarea*, and other decorative varieties are used ornamentally. These species are most definitely herbaceous, not



evergreen. But my true culinary sages of the species *officinalis* are prone to hang out all year round, offering beauty, fragrance and taste, although harvesting (which means pruning) in winter is not recommended. I find golden sage, purple sage, and tri-color sages more finicky to grow than the culinary more mundane, but nonetheless tasty, 'Bergarten' sage. I suppose I should not complain that my beloved culinary sage plants are short-lived. *Rodale's* recommends replacing plants every three years or so, or else the plants become woody and less productive (442). This resource also recommends that should "you wish to hold them over the winter, the last fall harvest (in the first year the only harvest) should be no later than September and should be a light one. In subsequent years, two or three harvests are possible" (442). That means admiring your culinary sage in winter, not eating it.

Purple Sage, *Salvia officinalis* 'Purple' in the Garden of Debbie Moore Clark, June 7, 2008. Used with permission.

The Thymes, *Thymus vulgaris*, tend to hang out in leaf all year, including winter, given the plant's hardiness in zones 5-9. These tough plants, which can really take the heat in summer, can also take the cold in winter, although not as beautifully. Winter plants still offer leaves for our favorite

dishes. Expect leaves to be less tender than spring's flush, but nonetheless flavorful.

For a beautiful and productive herb garden, intersperse evergreen herbs with herbaceous herb plants so your garden will maintain its good looks year round. Herbs are truly useful plants, right down to the fact that many are there for us any time of year. *DMC*

Source: *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs*. Kowalchik, Claire & William H. Hylton, Editors. Rodale Press, 1998.



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