

## *Herbs: Quintessential Drought-tolerant Plants*

*Debbie Moore Clark*

As we take note of our precious earth's warming trends, we gardeners want to seek out plants that can take the heat. Herbs are an excellent choice. Many herbs hail from the dry and hot Mediterranean region, where the soil is lean and rocky. Such environs grow good genes and make for tough, unfussy plants. It is exactly this heritage and these attributes that make herbs quintessentially drought tolerant.

There are many reasons to grow herbs, those typically useful plants, which according to Rodale's, are historically medicinal, and valued for their medicinal, savory or aromatic qualities. As plants go, herbs are fairly undemanding, pest and disease free, need little water, take the heat, and have few growing requirements—good news for Planet Earth and busy gardeners.

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Generally speaking, well-drained lean soil (no wet feet!) and a minimum of six hours of sun per day are all that are required. No fertilizer is needed, but do amend clay or sandy soils with compost to improve its tilth. Compost will also provide micronutrients, which are essential to healthy soil.

No wet feet and good drainage is essential; thus, no copious amounts of water. Worst of all is soil that doesn't drain well. Herbs simply cannot abide wet feet. Beware Carolina clay. Amend with compost to open the soil, allowing it to breathe and drain quickly.

Periodic division of perennial herbs is beneficial, which renews the vigor of the original plant and provides the gardener and her friends with more plants, each genetically identical.

As we become greener in our approach to gardening, we seek plants that do not require fertilizers and chemical sprays. Again, given their preference for lean soils, herbs are an excellent choice.

Growing herbs is amazingly simple, a good choice for the novice or seasoned gardener.

Here are my "top ten" picks for drought-tolerant, sun-loving, low-water plants:

Chives

Garlic Chives, *Allium tuberosum*

Flat, strappy leaves have excellent garlic flavor for dressing a baked potato. Be warned: a prolific self-seeder if allowed to bloom.

Onion Chives, *Allium schoenoprasum*

Round, hollow leaves have mild onion flavor for dressing a baked potato and more. Florets pulled from blossom balls also have onion flavor and make a beautiful and tasty garnish as well. The more you cut them back, the more they seem to grow!

Lavender, *Lavandula angustifolia*

Varieties abound. My favorite is Lavender, *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead'. Another favorite is the smaller and dark purple 'Hidcote'.

Lovage, *Levisticum officinale*

Strong, sweet-salty celery taste; use this herbaceous perennial sparingly in soups and stews. Tender stems may be eaten in salads.



Oregano, Greek, *Origanum* spp.  
Herbaceous perennial with an excellent and spicy flavor for culinary uses. Excellent used dried.

**Caption: A beautiful stand of Greek Oregano just before harvest in the Garden of Debbie Moore Clark. Used with permission.**

Parsley, Italian Flatleaf, *Petroselinum crispum*  
Biennial, but treat as an annual as the plant will bolt and set seed in its second year, and then leaves will taste bitter; a butterfly magnet. Expect to use this plant through winter in USDA Growing Zone 7b.

Rosemary, *Rosemarinus officinalis*

Perennial evergreen shrub; good foundation plant; don't let dry out completely, especially if grown in pot culture.

Sage, *Salvia officinalis*

Hardy perennial sub-shrub; does not like high moisture or humidity. Several culinary varieties, which may be used fresh or dried: purple sage, Bergarten sage, tri-color sage, golden sage.

Many ornamental varieties also available to decorate the garden with splendid bloom. Here are but a few:

- Mexican Bush Sage, *Salvia leucantha*, with velvety purple blooms in fall until frost
- Pineapple Sage, *Salvia elegans* (also edible), with cherry-red blossoms in fall until frost
- Clary Sage, *Salvia sclarea*, a biennial with white blooms in spring



Thyme, *Thymus vulgaris*

Numerous cultivars and flavors, including luscious Lemon Thyme, *Thymus X citriodorus*; excellent ground cover.

**Caption: Purple Sage from the Garden of Debbie Moore Clark, 060708. Used with permission.**

Yarrow, *Achillea filipendulina* 'Coronation Gold'

Hardy perennial with lacy foliage; 'Coronation Gold' has particularly stiff stems, which keeps plant from slopping as badly as other cultivars; 'Coronation Gold' also makes an excellent everlasting when cut and hung upside to dry slightly before full bloom.



In her suburban garden, Debbie Moore Clark grows herbs organically for culinary and ornamental uses.