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# Growing Herbs in a Florida-Friendly Landscape

## INTRODUCTION

For home gardeners planning to grow herbs, North Central Florida's hot, humid, growing season means it's essential to choose plants that will thrive in a property's specific growing conditions. Some things to consider are: Which herbs do you enjoy? Which will grow well in your zone given your soil and light conditions? Would containers or raised beds work best in your situation?

Using the nine Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles can be a guide to create an herb garden that offers natural beauty, culinary uses and unique fragrances while ensuring an herb garden does no environmental harm, conserves water, prevents erosion, and supports and protects Florida wildlife.

## 1. Right Plant, Right Place

- For convenience, locate herbs close to the kitchen and a watering source.
- Determine each herb's growing pattern and mature size to see if you'd like it in containers or raised beds. Some herbs, including mints (*Mentha* spp.), will spread and take over.
- It's easy to customize soil in containers, and to adjust location for light and temperature shifts.
- Research each herb's sun and moisture needs. Group herbs with the same requirements.
- Florida's rainy season is too wet for many sun-loving Mediterranean herbs like sage (*Salvia officinalis*) and thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*). You may need to cover or move them to prevent rot.



**FIGURE 1:** Creeping rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis Prostratus*) in foreground and garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) both need full sun and well-draining soil.

Image credit: Linda Lewis

- Many herbs need 6 hours of sun daily. Check if trees or other items might shade mature herbs.
- Choose varieties that grow well in your USDA Hardiness Zone. Alachua County is in zones 8b and 9a.
- Check to see if your herbs are perennials or annuals in your USDA Hardiness Zone.

## 2. Water Efficiently

- Seedling and young plants may need to be watered daily. Mature plants should be watered less often, but for a longer time to encourage growth of deeper roots.
- Observe your plants for signs of heat or drought stress, such as wilting leaves or droopiness.
- Plant herbs with similar moisture needs together to conserve water and simplify maintenance.

- To supplement rainfall, hand water early in the morning or use micro irrigation systems to deliver water directly to the base of plants. These approaches minimize splashing water on leaves, which can cause disease.
- To avoid potential contamination from bacteria or pollutants, don't use rainfall collected in rain barrels or reclaimed water on edible plants.
- Herbs grown in containers may dry out quickly and need regular, even daily watering. Plastic pots retain moisture more readily than clay pots.

### 3. Fertilize Appropriately

- Most herbs grow well in soil with a pH range of 6 to 7.5. Some, including lavender and rosemary, prefer slightly more alkaline soil (7.5). A soil test can indicate if adding lime or fertilizer is necessary to adjust pH.
- Using too much fertilizer produces lush growth but little flavor. Fast-growing herbs that are harvested often, such as parsley and basil, may require more fertilization.
- Instead of commercial fertilizer, apply compost as an excellent source of nutrients.

### 4. Mulch

- Mulching herb beds or containers helps retain moisture and reduces evaporation. Mulch also suppresses weeds, helps soil maintain uniform temperature, and prevents erosion.
- For delicate plants and seedlings, use a lighter mulch such as leaves, straw or compost. Apply no more than 1 inch depth. For larger plants, apply 2- to 3 inches of mulch. Pull mulch 1 to 2 inches away from the main stem.

- Herbs such as sage and lavender that thrive in drier soil benefit from a 1- to 2-inch layer of small stones or gravel instead of other mulch.
- When growing edible plants, avoid mulching with grass clippings that have been treated with chemicals.

### 5. Attract Wildlife

- Plant more than you need, so caterpillars can feed on some plants as others bloom, attracting pollinators.
- Mint, marjoram (*Origanum majorana*), oregano (*Origanum vulgare*) and sage (*Salvia officinalis*) produce flowers that attract bees.
- Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*), dill (*Anethum graveolens*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) are host plants for swallowtail butterfly species.
- Hummingbirds are attracted to mint, rosemary, catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*).



**FIGURE 2:** Black Swallowtail caterpillars on dill.  
Image credit: Matthew Orwat



## 6. Manage Yard Pests Responsibly

- Avoid chemical pesticides. Use the [Integrated Pest Management \(IPM\)](#) process to decide about pest management.
- Aphids, mites and scale infestations lead to damaged leaves. Sooty mold and ants are signs of those pests. Begin treating by forcefully spraying plants with water from a garden hose. If needed, apply insecticidal soap then neem oil.
- Identify caterpillars that are the larval stage of desirable butterflies. Undesirable caterpillars may be removed by hand or with bacterial thuringiensis products.
- Downy mildew is a problem in warm, wet, humid climates and affects basil. Plant resistant varieties in full sun and don't crowd. Monitor plants for leaf yellowing and dispose of infected plants, away from other plants.
- In a mixed garden, herbs may attract beneficial insects such as lady beetles and pollinators, while repelling pests. Basil planted near tomato plants may repel tomato hornworms and dill planted near cucumbers may repel cucumber beetles.
- When dill, parsley, cilantro and fennel bloom in cool season, they draw beneficial ladybugs and parasitic wasps that prey on insect pests.

## 7. Recycle Yard Waste

- Herbs may be dried for later use.
- Plant matter that is not diseased may be composted.
- Avoid composting basil affected by downy mildew.

## 8. Reduce Stormwater Runoff

- Don't overwater your herbs. Efficient watering helps prevent fertilizer and other contaminants from polluting the region's groundwater.
- If planting in the ground, make sure that the area drains well.

## 9. Protect the Waterfront

- Leave a 10-foot low-maintenance zone along the waterfront. Don't mow, use fertilizer or pesticides in that area.
- Planting native aquatic herbs such as Smooth Water Hyssop (*Bacopa monnieri*) just below the water's edge can help prevent erosion and reduce stormwater runoff.
- If you see native elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* subsp. *canadensis*) growing along a waterfront, be aware that all the plant's parts are toxic, including unripe berries. To grow elderberries for consumption, consider cultivars such as 'Adams' for high quality fruit.

## RELATED INFORMATION

The [Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ program](#) focuses on preserving and protecting Florida's water resources and promotes the nine principles through public outreach and education across the state.



Read more about [growing individual herbs, and herbs that grow best in spring, fall and winter](#).



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**FIGURE 2:** Keeping mints in containers prevents their aggressive spread. From left, candy mint (*Mentha x piperita* 'Candy'), mojito mint (*Mentha x villosa*) and chocolate mint (*Mentha x piperita* f. *citrate* 'Chocolate'). Image credit: Linda Lewis