



Herbs that Beat the Heat

Favorite Varieties that Flourish in Summer

by Barbara Pleasant

Some of the best plants to keep as summer companions are herbs that enrich life with their flavors, fragrances and beauty. It's not too late to pot up a few herbs or plant them in the garden if we choose varieties that thrive in hot, summer weather.

Reliable Basils

"I place basil as the number one herb in popularity, as well as heat tolerance," says Cristina Spindler, owner of the Peconic River Herb Farm, in Calverton, New York. "Basil actually prefers heat."

There are many types, and green-leafed culinary varieties are easy to grow through the summer, provided they're not allowed to dry out. Two particularly heat-hardy types are purple-leafed varieties such as red

rubin and African blue, which debuted in 1983.

"Purple basil is shockingly fragrant and beautiful on the plate. Plus, it's easy to grow in a small space and produces quickly," says Lisa Kessler, who for several years has co-owned with her husband, Ben, the White Hills Lavender and Herb Farm, in Dearing, Georgia. "The flowering tops are usable as herbs and as beautiful cut flowers, so don't toss them away."

"African blue basil flourishes in summer heat and is an especially beneficial nectar plant for bees and other pollinators," says Traci Anderson, who has been running Seminole Springs Herb Farm, in Eustis, Florida, in their family for more than 20 years. Vigorous and heavy-flowering, it can grow to over three feet tall, and usually persists as a perennial in Florida,



Texas and other mild winter climates.

Mediterranean Flavors

Rosemary is the most adaptable and heat tolerant of Mediterranean herbs; it can be grown as a perennial where soil doesn't freeze hard in winter.

"My top herb garden choice for the hot, humid conditions in the South is Tuscan blue rosemary, because it is beautiful, easy to grow and is wonderful in all kinds of foods and products," Kessler says. "It blooms in several seasons and provides bees with off-season food."

Thyme is a top cooking herb, although too much summer rain can lead to mildew and leaf blight. This rarely happens with Summer savory, which has a punchy flavor that Spindler describes as "a peppery cross between oregano and thyme that's perfect on all of the classic summer veggies—squash, green beans, tomatoes and corn."

Kessler recommends oregano as part of our summer planting list. "Let your kids or grandkids have the experience of putting it in the pasta sauce. It's easy to grow in a small herb garden and will last through the winter in most parts of the South."

An unrelated tropical plant from Africa with strong oregano flavor, the leaves of variegated Cuban oregano are pretty enough to grow alongside flowers, and the plants thrive in humid heat. Cuban oregano readily grows through hot summers, and the plants produce more leaves each time leaf tips are harvested.

Tempting Tropicals

In Central Florida, Anderson recommends culantro, aka Mexican coriander, as a summer herb different from the better-known cilantro. "Culantro equals the flavor of cilantro, but with no bitter or medicinal aftertaste." A great long-term performer, it continues producing flavorful new leaves even

after the plant starts blooming.

Anderson also suggests growing West Indian lemongrass for its fragrant leaves and thick stalks. A vigorous, clump-forming grass, lemongrass can be grown in containers anywhere or served as an edible ornamental in landscapes where summers are hot. "Lemongrass enjoys a sunny and moist environment, so it benefits from being near an air conditioner drain or downspout," she advises.

Growing Tips

Herbs always need watering in hot weather, and pouring from a watering can at the base is far better than bathing the leaves with a hose. Should containers become so dry that they refuse to take up water, place them in a broad dish or pail filled with three inches of water for 30 minutes to rehydrate the roots. Always grow herbs in pots with large drainage holes, so excess water can drain quickly.

Make a habit of pinching off a few herbal leaves, crushing them between the fingers and inhaling their fresh aromas. For maximum benefit, repeat daily.

Author Barbara Pleasant's new book, Homegrown Pantry: A Gardener's Guide to Selecting the Best Varieties & Planting the Perfect Amounts for What You Want to Eat Year Round, is now available (Storey Publishing). Connect at BarbaraPleasant.com.

