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Basils – Great in the Garden and in the Kitchen

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Whether you have a garden devoted to herbs or just a bit of room in your vegetable or flower garden, basils (*Ocimum basilicum*) are an easy to grow, productive herb. Even without garden space, basils are well suited to containers so grow them in pots or even window boxes. One of my favorite summer feasts is homemade pesto served over fresh pasta with a side of crusty Italian rolls.

Not only does basil have a rich and spicy flavor but the same can be said of its history. In Italy, basil is a sign of love. Supposedly, if a man presents a woman with a sprig of basil, she will fall madly in love with him and never leave him. Sacred basil is a holy plant in India and at one time was placed with the dead to protect them from evil in the next world and lead them into paradise. Some believe the name basil is derived from 'basileus', Greek for king, while others claim it comes from the legendary basilisk, a reptile who reputedly could kill with a glance.

This leafy stemmed annual is native to parts of India, Asia and Africa. It is now widely cultivated for commercial purposes. Quite a few varieties of basil can be found, especially in seed catalogs or at specialty nurseries. Some are excellent for culinary uses, other are best in potpourri, while still others make for interesting ornamental plantings. All are wonderfully aromatic.

When it comes to choosing the ultimate culinary basil, only you can decide which you like best. Sweet basil is most often used in food preparation. Try several varieties to discover which one suits your taste buds. I happen to prefer sweet, fine basil or 'Fino Verde'. The leaves are a little smaller but plentiful with a slightly more delicate basil flavor.

For pesto, I like the Italian large-leaf basil. Because the leaves are so huge, I don't have to pick as many each time I prepare this savory sauce. This large-leaved variety imparts a slight licorice taste to dishes which you may or may not find appealing. Lettuce-leaf basil is another good culinary choice. The large light green leaves can be used fresh in a number of recipes. Lemon

basil is the only other culinary basil I grow, marvelous for a lemon basil rice dish, the recipe for which I found in the Shepherd's Garden Seed catalog (now Renee's Garden Seeds) a number of years ago.

If you are looking for leaves to add to a potpourri, the lemon or lime basil are quite pleasing. Also, try holy basil for its spicy, clove scent, cinnamon basil, or even licorice basil. For an eye-catching combination in the flowerbed, consider 'Dark Opal' basil with pink zinnias, or 'Purple Ruffles' with the tall blue cutting ageratum and white geraniums. Both are too strong for my kitchen but make very attractive vinegars.

All of the basil just listed will get up to around 2 feet tall. In general, they are quite vigorous plants basking in the heat of the summer sun. If you are looking for a more compact bedding or container basil, 'Windowbox Mini' basil or 'Spicy Globe' are for you. Both are also supposed to be quite flavorful.

It is too late to start basil from seed this year but this plant is not difficult to start from seed, usually sown indoors in March. Several of the local garden centers I visited recently still have some nice looking basil for sale. Plant them in full sun in a well-drained soil with a pH in the mid 6's. Keep them watered during dry spells and do not over fertilize as they will not be as aromatic.

Harvest the leaves as the plants grow. Pinching will encourage bushiness. Remove the flower buds of the culinary types for best flavor. Usually, the ornamental basil are allowed to flower as they attract pollinators.

In the kitchen, basil, of course, is a must when making fresh-from-the-garden tomato sauce. It melds well with poultry, fish and lamb dishes, adds some zest to vegetables and salads, and tastes delightful paired with rice, eggs and cheese.

Basil leaves can be dried, frozen or used to flavor vinegars. When drying, basil leaves will blacken if dried too slowly. Try drying them in a microwave or blanch and freeze whole leaves. Leaves can also be minced finely, mixed with a little water or olive oil and frozen in ice cube trays. When freezing pesto, omit the garlic until it is thawed and ready to serve, as it can sometimes turn bitter, spoiling the flavor of a summer's memory too wonderful to ruin.

If you have questions about growing or harvesting basil, or any other home or garden topic, feel free to call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit their web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.