Indoor Herbs for Flavorful Winter Meals
By Dawn Pettinelli, Extension Educator, Department of Plant Science

One gardening activity that I already miss is walking out to the garden and snipping a handful of fresh herbs for whatever dish that I am preparing. While few have the space to grow all their winter seasoning needs, anyone with a sunny, southern window can grow a few pots of savory herbs.

As long as the ground is not frozen, you could pot up a division of chives, oregano or tarragon but I find that they take awhile to acclimate to indoor conditions. Better to purchase a few small plants that are already accustomed to pot life.

Herbs make wonderful houseplants but are a bit exacting in their cultural requirements. Since most are native to the Mediterranean region, they tend to be sun worshippers. A minimum of 5 hours of direct sunlight each day is necessary for good growth. Mints and lemon balm will tolerate less light. Herbs will do fine under artificial lights where sunny windowsills are limited.

Good drainage is essential for herb plants. Roots will quickly rot in waterlogged soils. When the potting mix feels on the dry side, bring plants to the sink and add water until it begins running out of the bottom of the pot. Let it drain thoroughly before setting the plant back on the saucer.

Many herb plants tolerate and even enjoy cool temperatures during the winter when their growth has slowed. Ideal temperatures are about 60 to 65°F during the day with a 10 degree drop at night. Do move plants away from windows on very cool nights so the leaves will not touch the frozen glass panes.

Herbs, like most houseplants, appreciate some humidity. Group plants together or set on pebble-lined trays filled with water to increase humidity. Perhaps they can be placed in a room you run a humidifier in. Fertilize once a month with a half strength water-soluble fertilizer.

Some herbs are better adapted to indoor life than others. Selection will also depend on your culinary tastes. A few of my favorites include rosemary (which has to be overwintered indoors anyway), thyme, ‘Spicy Globe’ basil, garlic chives, oregano, sage, parsley, chocolate mint, and marjoram.

Garden Sage image by Dawn Pettinelli.
There are numerous varieties of thyme to grow as well. Choose those with flavors most appealing to you. Many have decorative foliage as well. While not a true thyme, broadleaf thyme, *Plectranthus amboinicus* (formerly *Coleus amboinicus*), has fleshy leaves and an interesting thyme-oregano flavor.

Your local garden center or nursery may offer a few herbs for sale this time of year. Rosemary and bay are often available for the holidays. Grocery stores with floral departments may also carry potted herbs. I found some nice basil plants in the fruit and vegetable aisle recently. There are a number of online sources for herb plants and herb seeds as well.

Herbs make pleasant winter companions as well as great holiday gifts. For more information on growing herbs indoors or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website, or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.