



HERBS

ABOUT HERBS

What kind of plant is considered an herb? The narrow botanical definition of an herb is any seed-bearing, non-woody (fleshy or herbaceous) plant that dies back to the roots in winter. This definition omits woody shrubs like rosemary and lavender and a wide variety of annuals, biennials, perennials, trees, shrubs, and vines. For this reason, many herb gardeners and gardening authorities expand the definition of herb to include fleshy and woody plants that are useful or beneficial to people in one or more ways.

“Plant dill, parsley, and fennel as host plants for butterflies. The Swallowtail butterflies especially love these herbs.”

– Joann Gallagher, GEMG

Herbs have a long history of use for culinary, medicinal, cosmetic, and magical purposes. In the western world, herbal use is traced as far back as the ancient Greeks. Evidence exists of cultivation of herbs within European castle and monastery walls as early as the 11th to 15th centuries. In Asian cultures, herbs have been used in Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine in India, as well as for cooking, for thousands of years.

Herbs delight us with their sweet, spicy, peppery, or bitter fragrances and flavors. In the kitchen, basic culinary herbs like basil, oregano, sage, and rosemary enhance our cooking and please our taste buds, but these herbs originally were used to improve or mask the taste of rancid food in the centuries before the development of food preservation processes and the invention of refrigeration. Some herbs like santolina, rue, and yarrow are not used in cooking.

Medicinal herbs have been used for centuries to treat diseases and injuries. Some medications we use today

in Western medicine are derived from herbs. Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) gives us digitalis, a powerful cardiac medication. Acetylsalicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin, used globally to treat fever and inflammatory pain, was derived from compounds found in meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and later synthesized in the laboratory. Herbal teas are popular today for a variety of conditions. We can drink chamomile tea to help us sleep; echinacea tea at the first sign of a cold; or elderberry tea to help strengthen the immune system. You should consult your medical doctor before using herbal products for health problems.

Some herbs are used to make fabric dyes. Parsley, purple sage, and pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) are three examples of herbs that can be used to dye fabric or wool. Lavender has long been used in the cosmetic industry for its lovely scent, but it also was utilized in earlier centuries to repel insects. Herbal essential oils are used in aromatherapy and massage. The oils also lend their fragrances to soaps, sachets, and potpourri.

Fragrant herbs add to the beauty of live and dried floral arrangements and wreaths. Herbal recipes and craft instructions abound online and in bookstores.

Some herbs were used in magic spells for love and protection. Herbs also helped to ward off evil spirits. We all know that garlic will keep vampires away!

So, why not grow your own herbs? Many herbs can be grown successfully in Gloucester with a minimum

“I plant herbs near the entrance of the garden to eliminate mosquitoes and flies, etc.”

– Celestine Brooks, GEMG

of effort. The general climate of Gloucester County lends itself to successful propagation of herbs native to Mediterranean or Asian countries. Full sun, good air circulation, and well-drained soil are essential ingredients for the health of many popular herbs.

Each herb has a specific life cycle. An annual dies after the first growing season. A biennial sets seed

and dies after the second growing season. A perennial dies to the ground each winter and grows back the following spring. Some herbs, such as basil and fennel, are perennials, but are grown as annuals in our USDA Hardiness Zone (7b for most of Gloucester County; 8a at Gloucester Point). It is helpful to know the life cycle of each herb you grow, so that you can know when to divide or replace it.

POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER

Some of the more popular herbs that grow well in Gloucester County gardens are included in the following table. Local garden centers and online sites often carry unusual herbs that also will thrive in our area.

Hundreds of new cultivars are developed each year. All-America Selections (AAS) is an independent, not-for-profit organization that impartially tests and introduces the best new varieties of garden plants developed each year in North America. Some classic and new AAS award winners, as well as favorites of Gloucester Master Gardeners, are described in the table on the following pages.

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
Aloe vera <i>Aloe barbadensis</i>	A succulent usually grown as houseplant; up to 2 feet tall by 2 feet wide. Gel inside leaves can be applied to minor scratches or burns. ALWAYS seek medical attention for serious burns.	Full sun or light shade in well-drained, gritty soil	Perennial, but not frost tolerant Do not over-water
Basil <i>Ocimum basilicum</i> 'Dolce Fresca'	Grows 15 to 24 inches tall with oval pungent green or purple leaves and bears spikes of whitish to purplish flowers throughout the summer and fall Use with all meats, fish, poultry, and vegetables. <i>O. basilicum</i> 'Genovese' is excellent for pesto. New for 2019: 'Amazel' TM 2015 AAS Winner, 'Dolce Fresca'	Needs 6 hours full sun in dry, light, medium rich soil that is evenly moist and well-drained	Tender annual Not frost tolerant. Plant in spring after all danger of frost. Fertilize at planting time, and pinch growing tips when plants are 4 to 6 inches to induce bushiness.
Bay, Sweet Bay, or Laurel <i>Laurus nobilis</i>	Evergreen tree. May grow to 20 feet in our region. Use dried or fresh-picked leaves in bouquet garnis for stews, soups, sauces, stock, and Spanish and Creole dishes.	Full sun; protect from wind. Average, well-drained soil	Not frost tolerant. If small, move inside for winter. Bay is a good tree for trimming and cultivating into a topiary design.
Bee balm, Bergamot, or Oswego tea <i>Monarda didyma</i>	Bushy, rapidly spreading clumps that can become invasive. Dark green leaves have pleasant, basil-mint fragrance. Infuse leaves to make tea with Earl Grey-like flavor. Native to North America, called "liberty tea" when used by colonists after the Boston Tea Party. Flowers are red or white in natural forms. Cultivars may have pink or lavender flowers.	Full sun to part shade in rich, moist soil Grow from seed or by division	Perennial Divide clumps in spring every 2-4 years. Prone to powdery mildew. Buy mildew-resistant cultivars. Attracts bees and hummingbirds

POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER (continued)

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
Calendula or Pot Marigold <i>Calendula officinalis</i>	Colorful, easy to grow, edible annual. "Poor person's saffron;" use in paella or polenta for color, not as a flavoring. Add petals to salads.	Full sun to part shade in moderately fertile soil with good drainage Moderate water	Cool-weather annual that blooms spring to early summer in our area Prone to powdery mildew
Catmint <i>Nepeta faassenii</i> Catnip <i>Nepeta cataria</i>	Mint family. 1 ½ to 3 feet tall. White, blue, or lavender flowers on spreading plants with downy, gray-green foliage. Volatile oils in leaves are attractive to about 2/3 of cats. Catnip species are more potent. Can be used in cat toys or food, also in tea for human consumption. New for 2019: <i>N faassenii</i> 'Cat's Pajamas' 'Walker's Low' and 'Junior Walker' are reliable catmint cultivars.	Full sun to light shade on hot afternoons Prefers dry soil with good drainage	Perennial, blooms late spring through early summer Prune back to prevent scraggly appearance
Chamomile <i>Chamaemelum nobile</i> (Roman chamomile) <i>Matricaria recutita</i> (German chamomile)	White or yellow, apple-scented flowers on 8- to 12-inch stems. Dried flowers and leaves used for potpourri. Chamomile tea is used as a general tonic and sedative.	Full sun in light, well-drained soil Roman chamomile does not thrive in hot, dry summers. German chamomile will tolerate drought and alkaline soil.	Roman chamomile is a hardy evergreen perennial. Harvest every 2-3 weeks German chamomile is an annual that reseeds prolifically.
Chervil or French Parsley <i>Anthriscus cerefolium</i>	A dainty plant with anise-flavored leaves. Flat clusters of white flowers bloom in mid-spring. The leaves are chopped like parsley and used in French cooking, soups, stews, sauces, and salads. Leaves may be picked any time and used fresh, dried, or frozen. Use with poultry, fish, and salad.	Partial to full shade and sandy, rich, moist, well-drained soil Does not like to be moved	Annual Cannot tolerate nights warmer than 55 degrees, so best grown in spring and fall, and even mild winter. Will shrivel or go to seed in full sun. Sow seeds every 2-3 weeks in spring and fall.

"An herbal bouquet makes a terrific hostess gift. Make a bouquet of mixed fragrant herbs, such as lavender, rosemary, basil, and marjoram. Tie with a pretty ribbon or twine, and wrap in colorful tissue paper for a gift that is aesthetically pleasing and practical."

– Susan Camp, GEMG

"Chives are my favorite herbs. They are great for cooking, and the purple blooms complement many plants in the garden. The purple color adds a cool spot in the garden."

– Betty Durette, GEMG

POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER (continued)

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
<p>Chives and Garlic Chives <i>Allium spp.</i></p>	<p>Dense clumps of slender hollow leaves with a delicate onion flavor. Chives have purple to pink flowers.</p> <p>Flowers can be used in recipes, as a garnish, or mixed with white vinegar to form rosy-hued, onion-flavored vinegar. The leaves can be mixed with sour cream, added to soups, or substituted for onions in any recipe. Leaves do not dry well, but they retain their flavor when frozen. Use with vegetables, pasta, and salad.</p> <p>Garlic chives grow to 16 inches with white flowers in late summer. Leaf has a sweet garlic flavor when young. Same use as chives.</p> <p>2015 AAS Winner, 'Garlic Geisha'</p>	<p>Full sun or light shade in rich, moist, well-drained soil</p>	<p>Perennial herb</p> <p>Self-seeds and can become invasive</p>
<p>Coriander, Cilantro, or Chinese Parsley <i>Coriandrum sativum</i></p>	<p>A large coarse plant with clusters of white or pink flowers on 12 to 30 inch stems in late summer. Lemon-flavored seeds follow the flowers.</p> <p>Seeds are used in Indian curries, Asian stir-fry dishes, and Scandinavian breads. To harvest seeds, cut the flowering stalks containing seeds and hang upside down in a paper bag.</p> <p>When the fresh or dried leaves are used in salads, soups, and ethnic dishes, they are called cilantro or Chinese parsley. Cilantro is used in Asian, Indian, and Tex-Mex dishes.</p>	<p>Full sun to light shade in average, well-drained soil</p> <p>As roots do not like to be disturbed, it is best to plant seeds directly outdoors.</p>	<p>Annual</p> <p>Will "bolt" and go to seed in summer heat. May want to plant in the fall.</p> <p>Plan to sow seeds every 3 weeks in summer, unless you are growing it to use as coriander seeds.</p>
<p>Dill <i>Anethum graveolens</i></p>	<p>Light green, feathery foliage and delicate yellow flowers that bloom in midsummer.</p> <p>Foliage is used either fresh or dried to season eggs, vegetables, fish, and sauces. Dill seeds, which form after the plant flowers, are used for flavoring and pickling.</p> <p>Removing the flowers will extend the harvest period of the leaves. To harvest seeds, hang flowering stems upside down in a paper bag after the seeds start to turn brown.</p> <p>Use with poultry, fish, vegetables, and salad.</p>	<p>Full sun and slightly acid, average, sandy, well-drained soil</p>	<p>Annual. Grows 2 to 3 feet tall</p> <p>Protect plants from wind</p> <p>Does not like to be transplanted</p> <p>Self-seeds easily and can be invasive</p> <p>Plant enough dill to share with the caterpillars of the Swallowtail butterfly</p>

POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER (*continued*)

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
<p>Fennel (Sweet or Common) <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> <i>var. dulce</i></p>	<p>Looks like a dill plant and tastes like anise. Grows 4 to 6 feet tall and has clusters of yellow flowers in summer. Grown primarily for seeds and foliage.</p> <p>Pick leaves before flowers open. To harvest seeds, hold flower heads over paper bag and tap off ripe seeds.</p> <p><i>F. vulgare var. azoricum</i> is finocchio, or Florence fennel, the bulbous vegetable you see in the produce department.</p> <p>2017 AAS Winner, 'Antares F1'</p>	<p>Full sun in rich, alkaline, well-drained soil</p>	<p>Perennial. Grow fennel in Zone 7b as an annual.</p> <p>Needs little or no fertilizer</p> <p>Grow in an isolated spot because, like dill, fennel self-seeds easily and can become invasive.</p> <p>Handle gently; does not like to be transplanted</p> <p>Attracts larvae of Swallowtail butterfly</p>
<p>Garlic <i>Allium sativum</i></p>	<p>Lily family, along with onions, chives, shallots, and leeks. Used in Mediterranean, French, Mexican, and Asian cooking. May have health benefits of decreasing blood pressure and helping to prevent cardiovascular disease.</p>	<p>Full sun to part shade in rich, sandy loam</p> <p>Water regularly during growth and blooming period.</p> <p>Do not plant supermarket garlic.</p> <p>Choose from softneck or hardneck varieties.</p>	<p>Plant in fall in rich, sandy loam.</p> <p>Weed area before planting and plant individual cloves deeply, with pointed end up.</p> <p>Dig garlic when leaves turn brown.</p>
<p>Lavender (English) <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i></p>	<p>A mounded, fragrant plant with gray-green needle-like foliage and narrow 18 to 24 inch spikes of purple-blue flowers that bloom in summer. English lavender is most commonly grown.</p> <p>Flowers are used for garnishes, teas, sachets, potpourris, bath salts, and soaps. Pick flowers as they soon as they open and hang upside down to dry in a dark, airy place.</p> <p>Works well as a low hedge or border plant.</p> <p>Try 'Platinum Blonde' with variegated leaves and purple-blue flowers. Sweet fragrance.</p>	<p>Full sun in light, sandy, neutral to slightly alkaline, well-drained soil</p> <p>Buy plants, as seeds germinate slowly, and may not be true to species.</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>Fertilize lightly in spring as soon as new growth appears</p> <p>Prune back after flowering</p> <p>Divide plants frequently</p>

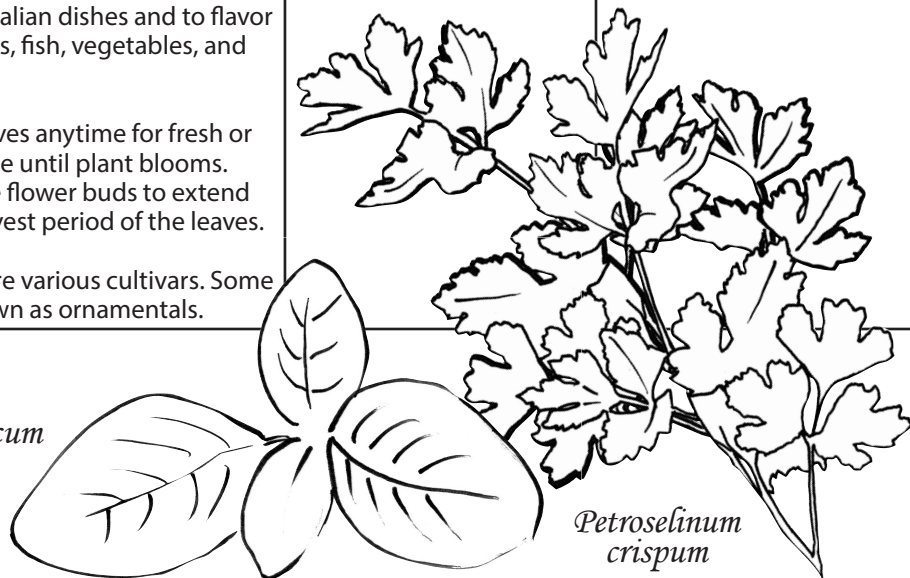
Rosmarinus officinalis



POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER (continued)

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
<p>Lemon Balm <i>Melissa officinalis</i></p>	<p>Crisp, lemon-scented, deeply ridged leaves on low-bush plant with white flowers that bloom in summer.</p> <p>May be used fresh or dried in teas, jellies, fruit salads, and cold drinks. Can rub fresh leaves on wooden surfaces to impart fragrance and gloss.</p> <p>To harvest leaves, cut stems to the ground before the plant blooms and hang upside down in a hot room; avoid bruising leaves.</p>	<p>Midday shade in poor to moderately fertile soil that is sandy and well drained.</p> <p>Start from cuttings or divide mature plant.</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>Can be invasive</p> <p>After plants have flowered, shear back to keep them compact.</p> <p>Attracts bees</p>
<p>Lemon Verbena <i>Aloysia triphylla</i></p>	<p>An open-growing, deciduous shrub from South America with insignificant white to pale lavender flowers in late summer. The lemon-scented foliage retains its full scent after drying.</p> <p>The leaves are used fresh for teas and salad dressings or dried for potpourris and sachets.</p>	<p>Full sun in organically rich, sandy, moist, well-drained soil</p> <p>Purchase plant or grow from cutting, as plants rarely produce seed.</p>	<p>Drops leaves and remains dormant in winter. Move inside. Do not fertilize; water only occasionally while dormant.</p> <p>Attracts whiteflies and other insect pests</p>
<p>Marjoram (Sweet) and Oregano <i>Origanum spp.</i></p>	<p>Native to Mediterranean countries, marjoram and oregano are in the same genus. Both can grow to 2 feet tall with fragrant 1-inch leaves and tiny pinkish-white flowers that bloom in midsummer.</p> <p>Marjoram has a sweeter, more delicate flavor. Oregano is more robust.</p> <p>Use in Italian dishes and to flavor all meats, fish, vegetables, and salad.</p> <p>Pick leaves anytime for fresh or dried use until plant blooms. Remove flower buds to extend the harvest period of the leaves.</p> <p>There are various cultivars. Some are grown as ornamentals.</p>	<p>Full sun in light, slightly rich, sandy, and well-drained soil</p> <p>Buy plants, rather than starting from seed, to insure you have planted the oregano with the pungency you want.</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>Keep slightly moist at all times.</p> <p>Weed out volunteers that aren't as flavorful as the parent plant.</p> <p>Attractive in beds and borders</p>

Ocimum basilicum



Petroselinum crispum

POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER (continued)

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
<p>Mint <i>Mentha ssp.</i></p>	<p>About 20 species and more than 1000 hybrids. Spearmint (<i>Mentha spicata</i>) and peppermint (<i>M. x piperita</i>) are most commonly grown.</p> <p>Spearmint has white flowers; peppermint flowers are pink or lavender.</p> <p>Peppermint has a sharper taste.</p> <p>Use in Middle Eastern dishes, with lamb or vegetables, such as peas or carrots, in iced tea and mint juleps.</p>	<p>Full sun to part shade</p> <p>Moist, rich, and slightly acid soil</p> <p>Buy plants or grow from divisions</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>Invasive. Spreads rapidly by runners.</p> <p>Grow in containers and divide every 3 years</p> <p>Prune regularly</p> <p>Recognize Mint family members by square stems.</p>
<p>Parsley <i>Petroselinum crispum</i></p>	<p>Two common types are curly-leaf, used as garnish, and flavorful flat-leaf or Italian parsley.</p> <p>Cut leaves with scissors; dry leaves on a screen; wrap leaves in a paper towel and refrigerate; roll leaves in plastic wrap and freeze; or freeze with small amount of water in ice cube trays.</p> <p>Use fresh or dried to garnish almost any meat, egg, fish, or vegetable dish.</p>	<p>Full sun to light shade in rich, deep, moist, well-drained soil</p> <p>Best to purchase plants, as seeds germinate slowly</p>	<p>Biennial</p> <p>Grow as an annual as its foliage becomes bitter and tough in the second year.</p> <p>Fertilize when plants are 4 inches tall and again a month later.</p> <p>Plant enough to share with caterpillars of the Eastern Black Swallowtail butterfly.</p>
<p>Rosemary <i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i></p>	<p>One to 3 foot plant with long, aromatic stems covered with fragrant, gray-green needlelike leaves. Pale blue flowers bloom in winter. Upright and prostrate varieties.</p> <p>Leaves, fresh or dried, are used in all types of meat, poultry, fish, and vegetable dishes, especially lamb, as well as in potpourris and teas. Use sparingly in cooking. Good in flower arrangements.</p> <p>'Arp' is a good cultivar for our hot summers.</p>	<p>Full sun or partial shade in light, moist, well-drained soil</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>In Gloucester, keep protected from wind.</p> <p>Fertilize every spring when growth starts.</p> <p>Does not like to be moved</p>
<p>Rue or Herb-of-Grace <i>Ruta graveolens</i></p>	<p>Grows up to 3 feet tall and wide. Powdery-coated, blue-green, club-shaped leaflets. Small yellow flowers.</p> <p>Used as ornamental in traditional knot gardens.</p> <p>Not used in cooking. Can cause severe gastric upset, hallucinations. Phototoxicity can cause burns and blisters.</p>	<p>Full sun in gritty, slightly alkaline soil with low fertility</p>	<p>Evergreen perennial</p> <p>Eaten by eastern black swallowtail caterpillars</p>

POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER (continued)

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
<p>Sage <i>Salvia officininalis</i></p>	<p>A shrubby plant with woolly leaves and hairy stems. Spikes of blue-violet, pink, or white flowers bloom in late spring and early summer.</p> <p>Use in teas, poultry stuffing, and sausages.</p> <p>Pick leaves before plant blooms and again in late summer. Dry them on a screen. Harvest only the top 1/3 of the plant.</p> <p>Dry leaves on a screen.</p> <p>Green, Purple, and variegated varieties.</p>	<p>Full sun or light shade in slightly acid, sandy, and well-drained soil</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>Soil should be moist during the summer and dry in winter.</p> <p>In early spring, cut back to keep plants bushy and fertilize lightly.</p>
<p>Santolina or Lavender Cotton <i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i></p>	<p>Evergreen shrub with silvery leaves. Grows up to 2 feet tall and 2 feet in diameter. Strong camphor fragrance. Small yellow flowers early to midsummer.</p> <p>No culinary use. Often used in Elizabethan knot gardens.</p>	<p>Full sun in gritty, slightly alkaline soil with low fertility</p> <p>Water sparsely</p> <p>Does not tolerate wetness</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>Prune in early spring and after flowering to maintain round shape.</p>
<p>Savory (Winter and Summer) <i>Satureja ssp.</i></p>	<p>A stiff, spreading, 6- to 12-inch plant with thick, narrow, gray-green leaves that have a strong peppery flavor.</p> <p>Summer savory flavor is more delicate.</p> <p>Use fresh or dried to flavor beans or other vegetables, as well as all meats and poultry. Summer savory is often used to reduce odor of cabbage and turnips.</p> <p>Pick leaves before the flowers open and dry them on a screen in a cool place.</p>	<p>Full sun in average, sandy, neutral to slightly acid, well-drained soil</p>	<p>Summer savory is an annual.</p> <p>Winter savory is a perennial.</p> <p>Fertilize in spring when growth starts.</p> <p>Pinch branch tips for bushiness; prune in fall or spring.</p>
<p>Sweet Woodruff <i>Gallium odoratum</i></p>	<p>Creeping woodland herb, 8-9 inches tall, with whorled leaves and fragrant, white flowers from late spring to midsummer.</p> <p>Honey and vanilla scented herb is added to May wine, but not used in cooking. Ingesting large amounts can cause dizziness and vomiting.</p>	<p>Part to full shade in moist, humus-rich soil</p> <p>Grow from nursery plants or divisions.</p>	<p>Perennial</p> <p>Attractive ground cover, but can become invasive</p> <p>Self-seeds</p>

POPULAR HERBS FOR GLOUCESTER (continued)

Herb	Description / Use	Location and Soil	Life Cycle and Care
Tarragon (French) <i>Artemisia dracunculus</i> <i>var. sativa</i>	A 3-foot tall woody perennial with dark green, narrow leaves; it rarely blooms. Light anise flavor. Use in béarnaise sauce, with fish, chicken, and vegetables, and to flavor vinegar. It is best if used fresh.	Full sun in rich, well-drained soil with average moisture in summer, but dry in winter Needs cold winter to grow well	Perennial Fertilize with fish emulsion in early spring and again in early summer
Thyme spp. <i>Thymus vulgaris</i> (most common)	A woody, spreading 6 to 18-inch tall plant of which there are more than 350 species and varieties. The gray-green leaves are joined in the spring and summer by lilac-colored flowers. Pick leaves any time for fresh use. Before the plants bloom, pick and dry leaves on a screen in a warm place. Use with all meats, fish, poultry, vegetables, and pasta. Try 'Wedgewood,' with variegated leaves and mild, sweet flavor. Less woody than common thyme.	Full sun in light, sandy, dry, well-drained soil	Perennial Prune back in spring to encourage bushiness and fertilize with cottonseed meal or bone meal. Divide when necessary. Will become woody after 2-3 years Creeping thymes can be used in pots, window boxes, and as ground cover.
Yarrow <i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Upright, 3-foot tall plant with feathery, 6-inch leaves. Flowers are white to pink, growing in flat clusters, up to 3 inches in diameter. Used for centuries to staunch bleeding. Not used in cooking. Attractive in live and dried flower arrangements. Many cultivars with variously colored flowers.	Full sun Average soil with excellent drainage Drought tolerant Grow from divisions	Perennial Deadhead to encourage more blooms Divide when plants become crowded May become invasive

"If you plant parsley, you need to plant much more than you need because the Swallowtail butterfly caterpillar loves parsley. This green with black stripes critter arrives uninvited to your garden to strip half of your parsley plants of their leaves."
– Marguerite Supler, GEMG

"To keep the feet of herbs dry, I place oyster shells around their base. The whiteness reflects the sun and the calcium is good for the herbs."
– Noel Priseler, GEMG Emeritus

"Most varieties of rosemary will do well if planted in a protected area with a southern exposure. Prostrate rosemary spreads, blooms all winter, and grows no more than 18 to 24 inches. Tuscan rosemary is tall (about 4 feet), sturdy, and has an intense aroma. Rosemary branches are lovely in floral arrangements."
– Florance Arnold, EMG Emeritus

"Be sure to plant mint in a container unless you want it everywhere."
– Jan Price, GEMG

GENERAL CARE OF HERBS

You can propagate herbs in several ways. Some herbs require partial sun for 3 to 6 hours per day and some grow best in shaded areas with no more than 3 hours of filtered sunlight daily. Most of Gloucester County lies within USDA Hardiness Zone 7b. Gloucester Point is in Zone 8a. Look for herbs that are labeled as hardy within your zone. The varieties of herbs you decide to plant may dictate the location of your herb garden or bed. A southeast-facing location for most herbs is desirable.

Most herbs require neutral to slightly alkaline soil with a pH of 6.0 to 7.5. If you are going to plant herbs directly into garden beds, soil testing is a necessity. You can obtain a soil test kit from the Gloucester Extension Office. Instructions for obtaining samples and a soil container are included. Return the sample to the Virginia Tech lab for testing. You will receive a report that tells you the soil pH (acidity or alkalinity) and the level of various nutrients in your soil so that you can amend it, if necessary. The cost may vary by a few dollars, depending on the soil tests you request. Whether your soil is primarily sand or clay, adding compost made from leaves, grass clippings, and other vegetable matter will improve soil structure and air and water movement within the soil. Commercially produced compost from a garden center also can be used. If you use compost generously, you probably won't need to fertilize your herb garden. If you feel that your herbs need a nutritional boost, try an organic fertilizer, such as fish or seaweed emulsion. Follow the package directions carefully. Too much fertilizer can be worse than too little. You can mix your own garden soil from 30% topsoil, 30% compost, 30% peat moss, and 10% perlite or pumice. (Gilbertie & Sheehan, 2012.)

Rich, fertile soil is not necessary for most herbs to grow successfully, but soil that drains well is important. Most herbs do not like wet feet, although there are a few exceptions noted in the table. Good drainage means that rainwater will soak into the soil in a relatively short time without running off or leaving your plants in a pool of standing water. You can ensure good drainage when planting herbs by digging to a depth of at least 12 inches and incorporating organic material into the soil.

“Over-watering kills more plants than under-watering.” – Gailon Friant, GEMG

Herbs can be propagated in several ways. Most annual herbs are started from seed in late winter 4 to 8 weeks before the last frost date and transplanted to the garden after the soil has warmed. Start your seeds in a sterile potting medium, not garden soil.

You can take cuttings from perennial herbs and place them in a mixture of 1 part each sand, perlite, peat moss, and water. You can also divide the roots of perennials like mints to start new plants. Some herbs, like dill, fennel, and cilantro, will self-seed. You may want to plant them in containers to keep them from spreading throughout the garden.

The fun begins with garden design, because herb gardens lend themselves to themes. You can plant informal beds or borders with simple rows or groupings or a formal bed with a complex Elizabethan knotwork design. Many commercial gardening books and magazines feature herb garden layouts, complete with the varieties and number of plants needed for each section. Your choice of herbs may dictate your design. If you like to use herbs in cooking, a kitchen garden filled with savory culinary herbs such as garlic, basil, and oregano is a necessity. Try to locate your garden near your kitchen door. Remember to check zone hardiness and hours of sunlight needed before investing in plants that may not work in your planned space.

An aromatherapy or cosmetic garden might contain lavender and rosemary. Herbs long used for medicinal purposes can be grown in a medieval monk's garden, although you should check with your doctor before self-diagnosing and consuming herbal medicinal preparations, as some herbs are toxic.

Parsley, dill, fennel, and rue attract caterpillars. If you are willing to share your plants with them, you will be rewarded with black swallowtail butterflies. No matter which herbs you plant, bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, and other pollinators will feed in your garden, adding to your pleasure and helping the environment.

Raised beds are an ideal place to grow herbs. Raised beds give your back a break. In addition, soil in raised beds warms more quickly in the spring. Raised beds also help to protect your plants from rabbits, which enjoy munching on tender, green herbs.

Container gardening is another possibility if you have only a small area for planting, or if you wish to have culinary herbs close to your kitchen door. Attractive, fragrant herb plantings can decorate a deck or back porch. Boxes on windows or deck railings are another alternative, although sufficient drainage can be a problem. The opposite problem can occur, as herbs in containers dehydrate quickly in Tidewater summer heat. Container gardening is particularly effective for invasive herbs, like bee balm and mint.

“Ceramic chimney flues make good “in ground” containers to keep herbs, such as mints, from overtaking the entire garden.

– Mo Lynch, GEMG

HARVESTING, PRESERVING, AND COOKING WITH HERBS

If you plan to dry or freeze your herbs, harvest them between the end of May and the end of June. Around June 21, the summer solstice, is an easy date to remember for harvesting.

For the strongest flavor, harvest your herbs before they flower. Keep a dedicated knife or small pair of scissors for cutting your herbs. Harvest herbs in the morning before the heat of the day. Rinse them with a spray of cool water the day before you cut them or right after harvesting to remove dust and insects, and then lay them on paper towels until the excess water has dried.

You can lay herbs in a single layer on a tray, rack, or screen to air dry. Place the screen in a dark place that is free of dust and curious cats. You also can dry your herbs by tying the stems together and placing them upside down in brown paper lunch bags or wrapping them in cheesecloth. The coverings will protect the herbs from dust and insects. Hang them

away from heat and direct sunlight in a room that has good air circulation. Both methods of drying will take up to several weeks.

You can dry them in a commercial dehydrator according to the product directions. Dry in the oven at less than 180° F for 2 to 4 hours, or until herbs are crumbly. To dry in the microwave, arrange a single layer of herbs on a paper towel, and cover with a second towel. Microwave in 30-second increments, turning them over each time until herbs are dry. Watch carefully to prevent burning the herbs. Microwave drying may destroy volatile oils.

Some herbs, including parsley, cilantro, basil, and chives, retain their color and flavor better when they are blanched in water in the microwave for about 30 seconds; immediately plunged into ice water; then frozen, either in plastic bags or in water-filled ice cube trays.

Store herbs in small, dark-colored glass jars, away from light and heat. When you cook with dried herbs, start with a smaller amount than you would normally use with fresh herbs, as the flavor of dried herbs is stronger. You can always add more flavoring, as needed.

“Drying herbs has been a fun thing for me to do for the last 30 years. When using fresh dried herbs, be careful because they are much stronger than those you buy in the store.

The first time I used sage it was so strong no one would eat the turkey dressing– not even the dog!

To dry herbs, hang them upside down in a shady and airy place. Most herbs can be dried in an oven set on warm. Personally, I use a dehydrator that works well for most herbs. Store dried herbs in a cool, dry place. I dry my herbs separately and then make a blend (all purpose) by mixing 8 or 9 different herbs.

Basil, mints, and chives freeze well.”

– Mary Simpson, GEMG

CAUTIONS

Some herbs are poisonous and you should take extreme caution when planting or handling them. Always wear gloves, especially if you have a cut or abrasion on your hand. Avoid touching your eyes or mouth until you have washed your hands. Many toxic herbs have medicinal or homeopathic properties, but have no place in a garden where children and pets play.

Toxic herbs that will grow in Gloucester include black hellebore, deadly nightshade or bittersweet, foxglove, jimson weed or thornapple, lily-of-the-valley, and monkshood or aconite. Some of these plants grow wild along the roadsides or in fields.

Toxic Herb	Comments
Black Hellebore <i>Helleborus niger</i>	The root extract is used in homeopathic medicine. Can cause skin irritation, mouth ulceration, and gastrointestinal upset. Do not plant with kitchen herbs.
Bitter Nightshade or Bittersweet <i>Solanum dulcamara</i>	Traditionally used as a sedative and antispasmodic, and for its antibacterial properties. Causes headache, dizziness, gastrointestinal effects, seizures.
Deadly Nightshade <i>Atropa belladonna</i>	Long used in herbal and homeopathic medicine. Some plant compounds used in pharmacotherapy. Causes confusion, delirium, hallucinations.
Foxglove <i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Contains powerful cardiac compounds that slow and strengthen heartbeat. Used in producing digoxin and digitoxin. Overdose causes nausea, vomiting, decreased heart rate, visual disturbances, and loss of appetite.
Jimson Weed or Thornapple <i>Datura stramonium</i>	Contains alkaloids. Leaves and seeds are poisonous and can cause hallucinations, coma, and death. No medical use.
Lily of the Valley <i>Convallaria majalis</i>	Contains cardiac compounds. Effects are similar to those of foxglove.
Monkshood or Aconite <i>Aconitum napellus</i>	All parts are poisonous. Acts as a cardiac and renal stimulant and may be subject to legal restrictions



Datura stramonium

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