

# How To Be A Wildly Successful Herb Gardener

## Part 1: Planning and Planting A Wildly Successful Herb Garden

**By Di-Di Hoffman**

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**Bouquet Garni Herbs**

*Established in 1978 for those that love good food, good health and good fun*



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## Introduction

*Somewhere there is a map of how it can be done. - Ben Stein*

It's human nature to be impulsive and when it comes to herb gardens we usually buy the herbs first, because they look so irresistible in the nursery, and then rush home fired up and ready to plant them.

But, the best way to get the most from your herb garden is to first have a plan.

Apart from being wildly successful a well-planned herb garden is:

- easier to plant and care for
- more productive than one that is not well-planned
- more sustainable

A **sustainable herb garden** is one that **thrives** with **minimal inputs**. This means that you want to minimize labour, water, fertilizer and pesticides. At the same time you want to **maximize** your yield of high quality herbs to use in your mouth-watering dishes.

Sound impossible?

Not at all. Herbs **fit perfectly** into the picture of sustainable gardening. Many prefer poor soil and most don't like too much fertilizer. They don't like too much water either, making them perfect water-wise plants. Most are naturally disease resistant, which reduces the need for pesticides.

Please feel free to promote this manual to family, friends or colleagues – anyone you know who are interested in growing and using herbs. The **How To Be A Wildly Successful Herb Gardener** manuals are for **EVERYONE**. Whether you have **minimal or extensive gardening experience**, you will **benefit** from the information provided.

There are a couple of small housekeeping details to highlight before you **scroll** to the next chapter. **First** on the list...

**Print out** the manual, pour yourself a beverage of choice, bring along a pen to jot down some ideas, and take it all to your favourite sofa. Learning a subject is so much more **successful** when you're comfortable.

Next...

Some of the chapters have specific **"things-to-do"** clear, **do-able**, **Action Steps**. Complete this 'homework' before moving ahead to the next chapter. By the time you finish this manual, you will have planned and planted your very own wildly successful herb garden.

Good luck  
Di-Di Hoffman

## Don't panic... Go organic

**A real gardener is not a man who cultivates flowers; he is a man who cultivates the soil...**wrote Karel Capek in "The Gardener's Year", many years ago.

There's an awful lot of hype around organic, but if you are growing your own herbs or veggies to eat, it's something you need to think about.

What does it mean to go organic? That's actually quite a **complex** question. Some say that it means not using any chemical pesticides or fertilisers because they can damage the environment.

That's true, but there's a sting in the tail. There are also some natural remedies, like tobacco dust, that can be toxic. Some organic formulations claim to be safe to use. It is best to **read the labels** very carefully.

I prefer to talk about organic gardening in the **positive** sense. It's about using our **common sense**, and working with nature. Just employ environmentally friendly products and environmentally friendly cultural practices.

It isn't very different from conventional gardening. You still need to plant at the right time, prune, control pests and mow the lawn.

The difference lies in our approach. It's how we understand, and value, **the interrelationship** between all the elements in the garden. It's how we understand the ecosystem of our garden. About a hundred years before the term "ecosystems" was coined, John Muir said simply, "Everything is connected to everything else".

- The micro-organisms that create humus in the soil
- The pollinating bees and butterflies
- The natural pest controllers like lady birds
- The synergies between plants (companion planting)
- and the cycle of life and decay.

In other words, organic gardening is a philosophy of gardening. It's not a style or a design.

## Make the soil your passion

***The soil is rather like a bran tub...you only get out of it what you put in.*** RHS Encyclopaedia of Gardening

Organic gardening starts with the soil. Make that your passion, and almost everything else will follow.

- Make your own **compost** and use it to condition and regenerate the soil.
- Add well-rotted **manure** – it is the best of all fertilisers.
- **Mulch** beds with coarse organic material (pine needles, bark chips, peanut shells). It keeps the roots cool and helps retain water.
- **Rotate** your crops to restore the balance in the soil. Some plants deplete, while others, like legumes add nitrogen to the soil. It also prevents pests and diseases building up in the soil.
- **Companion** plant – combine herbs and vegetables that stimulate each other's growth, or act as pest repellents. For instance marigolds repel eelworm.

The Henry Doubleday Research Association gives you more food for thought

- **Choose** renewable resources, thereby creating a sustainable future.
- **Reduce** pollution of the environment by recycling your garden, household and other waste, rather than dumping or burning it.
- **Encourage** and protect wildlife in your garden by creating suitable habitats and by minimizing use of harmful pesticides.
- **Move** with the times – take new scientific discoveries and ideas into account, as well as the best traditional knowledge.
- **Use** good gardening practices. You'll learn them all in this program.
- **Play** to your garden's strengths, capitalising on its characteristics.

If you're still not convinced here's some great reasons to grow your herbs and veggies organically

- You can grow for flavour. Commercial growers have to grow for shelf-life.
- Home-grown herbs and veggies are nutritious.
- You can decide what your family eats.
- You can grow things that you can't buy in the shops.
- You'll get fresh air, a bit of exercise and rediscover the seasons.

Do you agree there's a definite link between herb growing and organic gardening? The practice of both has been handed down through the centuries. And they both make our world a better, healthier place.

## Think about your role as gardener

In *The Principles of Gardening* Hugh Johnson says:

"What, if anything, do the infinities of different traditional and individual ideas of a garden have in common? They vary so much in purpose, in size, in style and content that not even flowers, or even plants at all, can be said to be essential.

In the last analysis there is only one common factor among all gardens, and that is control of nature by man. Control, that is, for aesthetic reasons. A garden is not a farm.

The **essence is control**. Without constant watchful care a garden - any garden - rapidly returns to the state of the country round it. The more fertile and productive your garden is, the more precarious its position. . . .The rake, the hoe, the shears and the broom lie at the very heart of gardening"

Somewhere close to the other end of the spectrum regarding the role of the gardener is *The No-Work Garden Book* by Ruth Stout. She maintains that most of the work associated with gardening is really unnecessary except for year round mulching.

When you are attempting to work with nature, is your role as gardener mostly **apprentice, helper, partner, or boss?**

In practice, maybe all of the above. Three of the more interesting books that address your role as gardener are:

### Ruth Stout's "No-Work Garden Book"

Ruth Stout wrote a series of articles for *Organic Gardening*, the magazine, starting in the early 1950's and continuing through the 1960's. Her thesis was that the garden would pretty much take care of itself if the soil was fed an abundance of organic material.

She advocated spreading a thick layer of organic material as a mulch over the entire surface of the garden. The material was simply allowed to remain on the surface and was not dug into the soil. She called it her "Year-round mulch method."

She didn't use any pesticides or commercial fertilizer. She simply moved the mulch back to expose a bit of soil for planting and then moved the mulch around the young plant after it had sprouted. She said it was less work than digging in the soil but, in truth, **she mostly wanted to get out of the way of Mother Nature** whom she considered as the better gardener.

Mike McGrath, the former Editor of *Organic Gardening*, said that the three most important things in gardening are: 'soil improvement, soil improvement, and soil improvement'. Mike McGrath agrees with a lot of Ruth Stout's approach.

### Henry Mitchell's "The Essential Earthman"

Henry Mitchell has been described as one who writes about gardening "rather the way Melville wrote about whales."

"Now the gardener is the one who has seen everything ruined so many times that (even as his pain increases with each loss) he comprehends - truly knows - that where there was a garden once, it can be again or where there never was, there yet can be a garden so that all who see it say, 'Well, you have favourable conditions here. Everything grows for you'. Everything grows for everybody. Everything dies for everybody, too."

"There are no green thumbs or black thumbs. There are only gardeners and non-gardeners. Gardeners are the ones who ruin after ruin get on with the high defiance of nature herself, creating, in the very face of chaos and tornado, the bower of roses and the pride of irises.

It sounds very well to garden in a 'natural way.' You may see the natural way in any desert, any swamp, any leech-filled laurel hell. Defiance, on the other hand, is what makes a gardener."

### Michael Pollan's "Second Nature"

Michael Pollan's *Second Nature* links gardening with the natural order and the environment. He has some interesting and important things to say:

"The gardener doesn't feel that by virtue of the fact that he changes nature that he is outside of it. He looks around and sees that human hopes and desires are by now part and parcel of the landscape.

The 'environment' is not, and has never been, a neutral, fixed backdrop; it is in fact alive, changing all the time in response to innumerable contingencies, one of these being the presence within it of the gardener. And that presence is neither inherently good nor bad"

"Because of his experience, the gardener is not likely to conclude from the fact that some intervention in nature is unavoidable, therefore 'anything goes.'

This is precisely where his skill and interest lie: in determining what does and does not go in a particular place. How much is too much? What suits this land? How can we get what we want here while nature goes about getting what she wants? He has no doubt that good answers to these questions can be found."

"It does seem that we do best in nature when we imitate her - when we learn to think like running water, or a carrot, an aphid, a pine forest, or a compost pile."

Take a short break. Think about your "gardening philosophy". Are you going to be helper, partner or boss?

## The right format

For fun or profit? Containers or in the garden? Indoors or outdoors?

You've probably made up your mind already about which option you want to follow. But don't discount the other, or a combination. It's simply wonderful to be able to have herbs in containers and in the garden, and to **get paid for doing what you love**.

To be or not to be...? Only you can decide.

Herb gardening is one of the most rewarding hobbies. You can also - very easily - make your hobby pay for itself.

Whatever your decision, don't get too carried away at the start. Rather work on something you can achieve in terms of your **enthusiasm, space, time, energy and money**.

Let's look at how each of these factors will impact on your new venture.

### Enthusiasm

There is absolutely no substitute for enthusiasm in determining the success of your project.

Whether you intend doing this for fun or profit listen to John Wesley's advice: "*Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to see you burn.*"

If you have your mind set on doing this for profit you will really need loads of enthusiasm. Or else as Vince Lombardi said: "*If you are not fired with enthusiasm, then you will be fired with enthusiasm.*"

#### **One thing's for sure...**

You are going to make a lot of mistakes along the road. Some of these will be costly. Some will drain your enthusiasm. Beware, some may even come close to killing your project.

Just remember this "*Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.*"  
- Sir Winston Churchill

### Space, time, energy, money

These all boil down to just one single variable. The size of your herb garden.

#### **Yes, size matters...**

A successful sustainable herb garden won't consume a lot of resources. If it does it is simply not sustainable. But don't make the mistake of thinking that it won't consume any resources at all.

As a **rough guide**. For a **three square meter** (1m x 3m) herb bed anticipate spending the following:

### For installation

- About an hour or two to install the garden. If your garden includes hard landscape elements – paths, etc. – you'll have to allocate more time.
- Soil improvement. Just one bag compost if you're very lucky.
- Roughly 10 plants per square meter. Times 3 square meters. That equals 30 times whatever you have to pay for a single plant.
- Plus your energy.

### For maintenance

- About 30 minutes of your time a week for caring for your herbs. Watering, weeding, etc. This will vary with the season.
- During harvest time you can add about another 30 minutes per week for harvesting and preserving.
- Then there will be the occasional bag of plant replacements, compost, organic fertiliser, pesticides, etc.

**"That sounds great"** you say...

Exactly what you had in mind for your new hobby. Now multiply it by three for a nine square meter (3m x 3m) garden.

Or how about multiplying it by 27 for an 81 square meter (9m x 9m) herb garden. Your herb garden is now a full time weekend occupation. Unless you have the resources to hire somebody to do it.

Okay. Agreed **that's a bit theatrical**. I'm just testing your enthusiasm. In practice you will actually spend less time and money per square meter the bigger your herb garden gets.

My advice. **Start small**. The smaller the better. A three square meter herb bed is **the perfect size for a beginner**.

The key is to use the resources you have at your disposal to your best advantage. Don't let the absence of certain resources dampen your enthusiasm.

*"Use what talents you possess; the woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best."* - Henry Van Dyke.

Most importantly don't lose sight of your dream. Plan for expansion from the start.

*"If you don't have a dream, how are you going to make a dream come true?"* – Oscar Hammerstein

Before you move on to the next chapter start your action plan:

## Action Plan - Step 1: Define your focus

Take some time to ponder and dream about the focus of your herb garden. Will it be fun, profit or a bit of both. In containers or in the garden? A few indoors? Write your focus down...

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Decide, even if it's just in your minds eye, how big your herb garden will be. Tip: Remember to take your resources into account.

Next...

Open the free booklet by Ann Marie van der Zanden and Jan McNeilan entitled **Basic Design Concepts for Sustainable Landscapes**.  
(The file name is **ec1533.pdf**)

**Print then read** through the booklet. This will help you to visualize how your herb garden will fit in with the rest of your garden.

Done?...

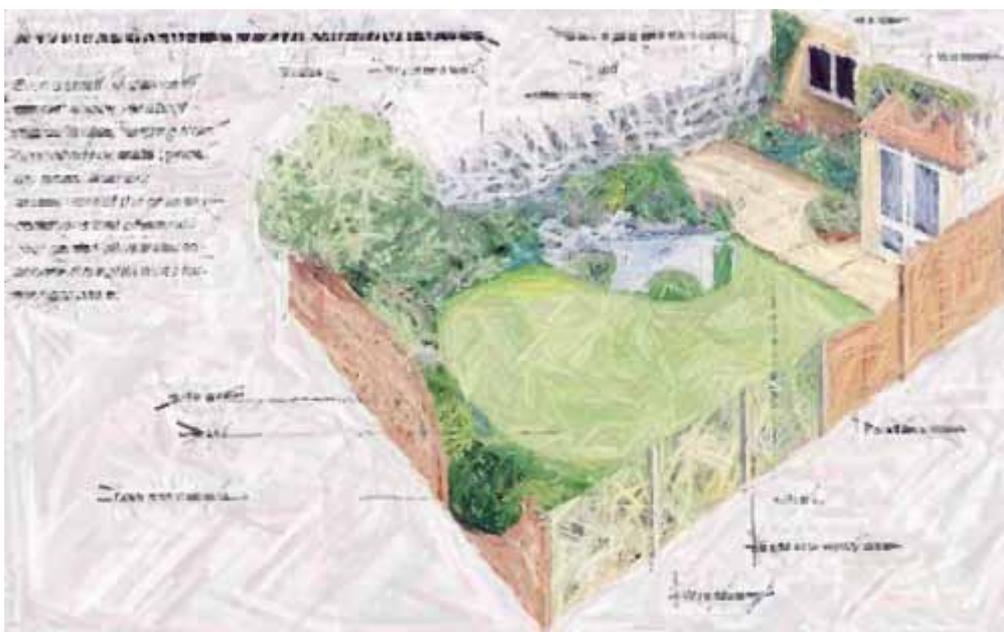
Let's move on to the next chapter.

## Understand your garden

This doesn't have to be unnecessarily complex. It just takes a little conscious observation.

Obviously gardening conditions are affected by the regional climate, whether you live in winter or summer rainfall areas or in humid tropical or sub tropical areas.

Over and above that you also need to **understand the micro-climate** – the very specific conditions – in your garden. Knowing those conditions helps you choose the right plants for the right place.



*“You wouldn't dream of moving into a house without taking a look at the area. It's the same in the garden. Before you can grow anything, you need to know what sort of conditions you have... there really is no need to waste money on plants that will hate your environment.” - Alan Titchmarsh*

Just like you, your garden has an unique character, defined by a distinctive set of conditions that work together. If you understand your garden's character you're well on your way to becoming a wildly successful herb gardener.

Here's the conditions you need to get to know:

- Sunlight
- Temperature and wind
- Rainfall
- Soil

Even if you don't have a garden as such and are thinking of growing in containers indoors or on an outdoor patio you still have to access the character of that area.

## Sunlight

Sunlight is of primary importance as your herbs will simply die without it. Almost all herbs are more compact in growth, produce more leaves and are richer in oils and flavour when grown in ample sunshine.

Sunlight is the 'fuel' that powers growth – a process called photosynthesis. And photosynthesis is what sets us apart from our friends in the plant kingdom. They can manufacture their own food. We can't.

Spend a day in your garden. Pay attention to areas of **sun and shade**. See how that shifts during the day. Think how it will change with the seasons. Also see how walls, hedges and trees cast shadows during the day.

The overall amount of sunlight different parts of your garden gets also depends on the direction it faces:

- **North-facing parts** of the garden get the most sunlight and are perfect for a herb garden. (In the northern hemisphere it will be the south-facing parts.)
- **East-facing parts** of the garden get morning sun and are also perfect for your herbs.
- **South-facing parts** of the garden get the least sun and tend to cold and damp. They are not ideal for your herb garden. (In the northern hemisphere it will be the north-facing parts)
- **West-facing parts** of the garden get afternoon sun and are also suitable for your herbs. Just be careful of areas next to a west facing wall as they tend to get extremely hot in summer.

Remember that as the sun moves during the day the light levels change. That's why I recommend that you actually spend a day in the garden and **note how the patterns change**.

And remember that a homemade lemon balm wine is said to improve your observation. Even if it doesn't. It's all in the name of becoming a wildly successful herb gardener.

## Temperature and wind

How **sheltered** is your garden? You may be in a frost belt but surrounding walls can keep the frost at bay. Or you may have frost pockets in lower areas of your garden.

Be aware of **wind** and how **air circulates** in the garden. Some very hot spots may have no air circulation while others are wind tunnels. You may need to increase airflow in some parts, and shelter others.

An **unexpected cold wind** may 'scorch' tender new growth, leaving it crispy brown. A black frost may kill some of your herbs.

What's the **average daily** minimum and maximum temperatures in your area? When can you expect the first frost of the season? And the last? These factors determine the length of your growing season.

If you don't know the answers to these questions check with a neighbour or with your local garden centre.

To make selecting plants easy gardeners categorise them into four broad groups based on the minimum temperatures they can survive in:

- **Hardy** plants will survive temperatures to -15°C (5°F).
- **Frost hardy** will survive to -5°C (23°F). The majority of herbs you will grow fall in this group. They will survive a frost or two but needs to be protected in areas with severe winters.
- **Half hardy** to 0°C (32°F). They won't survive a frost. Chilli peppers are a good example of a half hardy herb.
- **Tender** plants won't survive temperatures below 4°C. Meaning they cannot survive outside in most parts and must be brought inside. A good example is basil.

Don't be too rigid about the above groups. Gardening is not an exact science.

## Rainfall

Plants need water. Fortunately you don't need lots of water to be a wildly successful herb gardener. Most herbs are very water-wise. But you do need water to establish new plants.

The amount of water in the soil is influenced by:

- the time of year and local annual rainfall
- soil type
- the aspect – north-facing will dry out quicker than south-facing or shady areas

Having an irrigation system, or sufficient water points, in your garden makes you less dependent on rainfall. It will certainly increase your success rate.

## Soil

What are some features of good soil? Preston Sullivan in *Sustainable Soil Management* lists the following characteristics of a good soil:

- feels soft and crumbles easily
- drains well and warms up quickly in the spring
- does not crust after planting

- soaks up heavy rains with little runoff
- stores moisture for drought periods
- has few clods and no hardpan
- resists erosion and nutrient loss
- supports high populations of soil organisms
- has a rich, earthy smell
- does not require increasing inputs for high yields
- produces healthy, high-quality crops.

You can build these characteristics through simple practices that optimize the processes found in native soils.

How does soil in its native condition function? How do forests and native grasslands produce plants and animals in the complete absence of fertilizer and tillage?

Some of the things we spend money on can be done by the Mother Nature for little or nothing. Good soil management produces plants (and animals) that are healthier, less susceptible to disease, and more productive.

To understand this better, let's start with the basics:

### Soil Texture

A typical good garden soil is a balanced mixture of five constituents:

1. About two-thirds by volume weathered rock particles ranging in size from small stones down to grains of sand and silt and down to microscopic specs of clay;
2. About one third by volume animal and vegetable matter, mainly dead and decaying but also with a huge number of living organisms;
3. A considerable amount of air;
4. A considerable amount of water containing;
5. Dissolved or suspended nutrients.

Soil texture is about the proportions or relative amounts of the sand, silt, and/or clay particles that go into the mix. It is easy to remember the term, "texture" when you note that it is related to **the way a soil feels**.

A moist sample of a soil with a high content of the larger sand particles feels rough and gritty when pressed and rolled between the thumb and forefinger. A moist sample with a high content of the microscopic particles of clay feels smooth and almost oily.

Soil texture is important because it helps to determine how well your soil can pick up and retain air, water and nutrients. It also helps to determine drainage.

One of the most popular **home tests** for measuring the percentage of sand, silt, and clay involves nothing more sophisticated than a quart or litre glass jar with lid and a ruler.

It is based on the rate these different particle types settle in water. The large, boulder shaped sand particles settle the fastest, followed by the smaller particles of silt, and then followed by the very small and flattened particles of clay.

1. Collect about 2 cups (500 ml) of soil to be tested and pick out the bulk of the organic matter. Let the sample dry in the sun and break up any clumps by tapping with a hammer.
2. Put about 3/4 cup (200 ml) of the soil sample into the glass jar, fill almost to the top with water, cap the jar and shake vigorously for five minutes.
3. Let the jar sit undisturbed for 24 hours and measure the depth of the settled soil with the ruler. This is the total amount of soil particles.
4. Shake the jar again for an additional 5 minutes and allow it to stand for 40 seconds. Measure the settled soil. This is the amount of sand in the sample.
5. Keep the jar undisturbed and measure the settled soil at the end of 30 minutes. This is the amount of sand and silt together. Subtract the amount of sand from the total to get the amount of silt.
6. Subtract the amount of sand and silt together from the total amount of soil particles to obtain the amount of clay.

Percentage of sand = (depth of sand/total depth) \* 100

Percentage of silt = (depth of silt/total depth) \* 100

Percentage of clay = (depth of clay/total depth) \* 100

### Soil Structure

Sand, silt, and clay particles often become bonded together to form a single clod or multiple crumbs. Soil structure is the way these sand, silt, and clay particles are **grouped together**. The size and arrangement of these groupings influence drainage and nutrient availability. These collective structures are called aggregates or peds.

The **ideal garden top soil** has an open structure with lots of pore space and the aggregates are the size and shape of crumbs from the morning's toast.

Adding organic matter to the soil helps in the formation of **humus** which, in turn, helps to form and stabilize soil aggregates.

### Soil Types

Soil texture and soil structure determine, for the most part, how well air, water, and nutrients - along with feeder roots - can pass through the soil and how well the soil can pick up and hold the air, water and nutrients.

#### **Sandy soil**

Sand particles are relatively large, boulder shaped, and have a diameter ranging from 0.05 mm up to 2.0 mm. This gives the overall structure an abundance of air spaces or pores. Sandy soils are often called "light soils" because of their light density.

Sandy soils take up air and water easily. Because they drain very well they dry out rapidly. They warm up quickly in spring, and are easy to cultivate. They may lack nutrients, which are easily 'washed through' in wet weather. Gardeners often refer to them as hungry soils.

Sandy soils amend easily with organic matter which slows the rapid drainage.

#### **Silty soil**

Silt particles are intermediate in size between the particles of sand and clay. Silt particles range in size from .002 mm in diameter up to 0.05 mm. They can be boulder shaped or flat. Silt particles may combine with clay particles to form soil aggregates. Silt is an important component of loam.

The air space or pores around the silt particles or the silt aggregates is intermediate between that of sand and clay as is the drainage.

Silty soils are smooth and soapy to the touch. They retain moisture and nutrients better than sandy soils. They are very good soils if well managed.

#### **Clay soil**

Clay particles are flat and microscopic in size. There is very little air space between and around these flattened structures. They take up air and water very slowly, they drain slowly and they contain very little air. Clay soils are also known as "heavy soils" because they are so dense.

They can be amended with organic matter to drain faster and to take up air, water, and nutrients more readily. Clay soils are often very rich in nutrients.

#### **Loam**

Loam is the happy medium. It contains approximately 40% by volume sand, 40% by volume silt, and 20% by volume clay.

Loam has good drainage, a good ability to take up and hold moisture and nutrients, a good overall structure and is relatively easy to work. Warms up quickly in spring and doesn't dry out in summer

Loam with a generous quantity of organic matter is the ideal garden soil.

### Soil pH Values

In addition to 'type' your soil has another characteristic called its pH. The pH is a measurement of the relative "sweetness" (alkalinity) or "sourness" (acidity) of the soil.

The scale goes from 1 to 14. The pH of chemically pure water is 7.0 which is considered as neutral. The lower the pH away from 7.0, the greater the acidity. The higher the pH away from 7.0, the greater the alkalinity.

Most plants do best when the soil is just a bit on the acid side with a pH around 6.2 - 6.4. Herbs can even tolerate slightly alkaline soil very well. So pH is not that critical from a herb gardeners point of view.

But the pH of the soil is important in terms of plant nutrition. Some of the minerals become less available as nutrients in alkaline soils.

Pay your local nursery or garden centre a visit. They will be able to help you with the pH of the soils in your area. Some can even test your soil or refer you to a laboratory that can do it for you.

Don't bother to alter soil pH on a large scale. It's expensive and the results are only temporary.

### Drainage

Feeling like a soil scientist yet?

One more task to complete before you finish with your soil survey. You need to establish if your garden drains well.

If you don't know offhand [here's a simple test...](#)

Dig a number of holes about 30cm x 30cm x 30cm deep at random points across the garden. Fill with water. Let the water drain completely and fill again. If the water drains in 4 hours or less you have nothing to worry about. If the water takes more than 24 hours to disappear drainage is poor.

## Action Plan - Step 2: Draw a site plan

Complete the Landscape design planning questionnaire on page 10 of your *Basic Design Concepts for Sustainable Landscapes* booklet.

If you're feeling a bit lazy, you may skip those questions that don't relate directly to your herb garden. You definitely don't need to do the questions on page 11 of the booklet.

Next...

Draw a scale map (plot plan) of your property. On page 2 of your copy of *Basic Design Concepts for Sustainable Landscapes* you will find instructions for doing this.

Your scale map does not need to resemble an architect's drawing. A freehand sketch will do just fine.

You back already?...

**Great work.** Armed with your scale map and your site analysis you are ready to...

## Choose the perfect spot

The best location for your herb garden:

- Will be near the house
- Have good access
- Receives full sun most of the day
- Has well drained fertile soil
- Is reasonably level
- Is sheltered from cold winds and frost
- Is protected from pets

Does your intended spot meet the above criteria? Sure? Lucky you. See you in the next chapter.

If not. Don't despair...

Most of us have a very **limited choice** when selecting a location for our herb garden. Knowing how to use what you have and turning that to your advantage spells the difference between success and failure.

Hear **Henry Ford** on this: *"You say I started out with practically nothing, but that isn't correct. We all start with all there is. It's how we use it that makes things possible."*

But what if?...

The **best spot** in your garden is currently occupied by your partner's prize roses.

**Don't** let the threat of an expensive divorce – obviously assisted by your threatening behaviour with the spade – stand between you and that prize spot.

**Roses are lovely. But herbs are simply wonderful.**

It's like my wife's menu. We always have two choices: Take it or leave it.

Let's get serious...

### Good access

Two points to consider. First make sure that when planted each one of your herbs will be **within arms length**. It makes tending them a lot easier.

Next, ensure that you don't need to walk a mile, in the dark, through ten other garden beds, to reach your herb garden.

The **natural position** for a culinary herb garden is as close to the **kitchen** as possible. Simply because the closer they are to your kitchen door, the more likely they are to find their way to your dinner table.

But, bear in mind that many kitchens are south-facing and receives limited sun. To a certain extent the same applies to a medicinal herb garden.

The **perfect position** should be in plain sight as well. Where you will pass it each day as you enter and leave the house.

An **aromatic garden** can be anywhere where you will be able to enjoy the aromas. Below windows. In pots, or next to the patio or pool.

One of the advantages of herbs is that they can be planted almost anywhere. So if you don't have the space to devote to a herb garden as such look for spots and crannies in between existing borders and beds in your garden.

Don't discard the idea of a few herbs in containers, either indoors or outdoors. Herbs are exceptionally easy to grow as pot plants.

## Sunlight

Yes, it really is that critical. First prize is **full sun** throughout the day.

The **minimum** is about **half** the amount of available sunlight during the day. Just morning sun or just afternoon sun for example. Or perhaps somewhere in between.

If your herbs don't get enough sunshine a couple of things might happen:

- The **quality** won't be as good as those growing in full sun. But rest assured. The difference is normally so small that you won't even notice it.
- They will tend to grow **leggy**. This is easily corrected by pruning – harvesting – more often.
- They will probably need **less water**. That's a bonus. But be careful of over watering.
- They will produce “softer” growth, which will be **more prone to pests and diseases**. This is a little more serious. You'll need to be wide-awake and act immediately if you discover any pests or diseases.

**Beware** of trees or large shrubs in the vicinity of your herb garden. They will **rob** your herbs of water and nutrients. And the extra shade is something your herbs definitely don't need.

If you don't have any sun at all you can still grow herbs. In this case it will be **indoors** with the help of special 'grow lights' and lots of special care.

## A well-drained reasonably fertile soil

Next to sunlight, **drainage** is perhaps the most critical to your success. Most herbs are like humans – they hate constantly wet feet.

If you suspect the drainage of your soil is a **borderline case**, phone your local nursery. They will know the soils in your area and the best methods for improving drainage.

If your drainage is **really poor**. Consider growing in containers or raised beds.

**Soil fertility** is not critical at this stage. It's easy to improve.

## Reasonably level

The more level the site the easier it is to cultivate. But a site with a slight incline will assist drainage.

Just make sure that your proposed site is not in a hollow. **Hollows** can become waterlogged when it rains. Another disadvantage is that it could trap cold air in winter.

If you don't have a reasonably level site consider growing in containers, window boxes or terraced beds.

## Sheltered from cold winds, frost and pets

Providing shelter from harsh winter conditions can extend your growing season.

Most hobbyists simply pot up their tender herbs in winter and over winter them in a **protected spot**. It makes more sense than spending money on expensive protection measures. Your local nursery will be able to advise.

A herb garden can quickly **ruin the relationship** between you and your favourite family pet. Cat's love freshly dug soil as it eases their toilet routine. A **mulch** of bark chips can make the spot less attractive or you can fence in the garden, which also keeps the dogs out.

## Action Plan - Step 3: Choose the perfect spot

Lay a piece of tracing paper over your plot plan and draw a "bubble" where the best location for your herb garden will be. See page 6 of *"Basic Design Concepts for Sustainable Gardens"* for an explanation of bubble diagrams.

Then work through the following questions:

- Are you happy with the **access** to your herb garden?
- Will your herb garden receive **sufficient sun**?
- Are you happy with the **drainage** of the spot you've chosen?
- Do you know what effect the **slope** will have on your spot?

- Will your garden be **sheltered** from cold winds, frost and pets?
- If you have answered “no” to any of the above questions, are you aware of what might happen to your herbs? Are you prepared to give them the extra care they might need?

Happy with the spot you've chosen? Let the games begin...

## Brainstorm design ideas

*"I dream my painting and then paint my dream."* - Vincent Van Gogh

Designing your herb garden is the **most fun** you'll have with your herb garden action plan. The most important thing is – **don't be in a rush**.

Browse through as many herb books as you can. What a treat! Listen to other people's ideas. Steal with your eyes.

Once you get ideas, put them on paper, even if you are not a Rembrandt. **Think long term** – what you would like your garden to look like when it is finished.

Decide on the style you want. Ideally it should complement the rest of the garden and the look of your house.

They say **form follows function**. So think about the practicalities, the kind of space you have and, don't forget to **factor in your own personality!** That's right. It's no good going for a formal garden if you feel hemmed in by straight lines!

There are two basic styles:

### Formal herb gardens

According to Michael Kressy the Roman nobility's idea of **absolute luxury** was a well-ordered garden gracing the entrance to their home. As they strolled along the leafy walkways bordering herbs and vegetables, they would ponder the day's events.

Later, as gardening became more sophisticated, herb gardens grew in size and intricacy until patterns and designs took as much importance as the herbs themselves.

**Formal** herb gardens require **straight lines and geometric shapes** that are framed by low hedges and paths. A fountain, shrub (usually topiary) or bench usually forms a focal point.



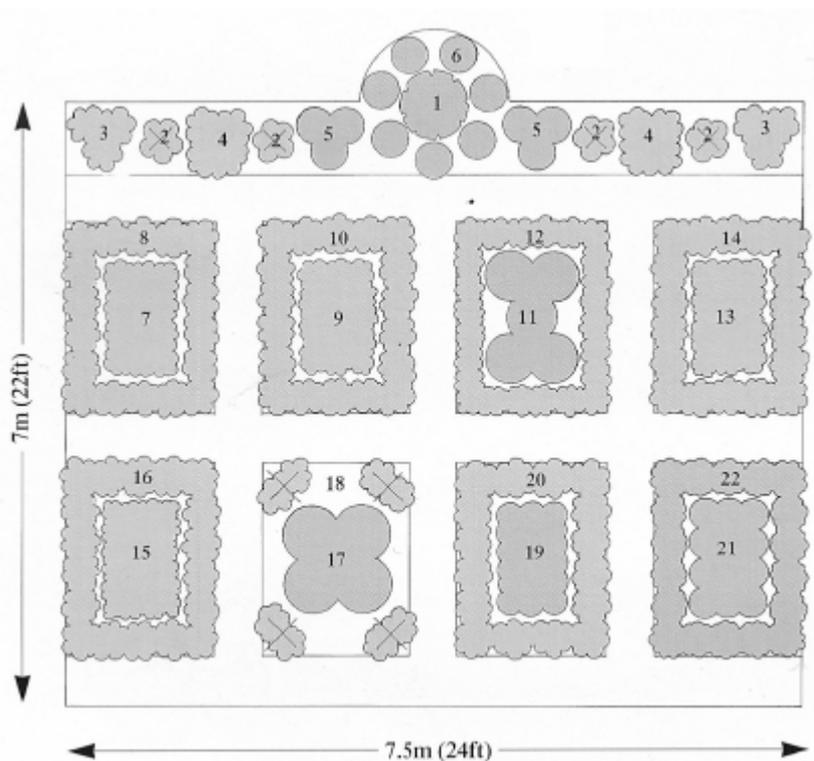
A knot garden is a good example of a really formal, formal herb garden.

Balance is key, with elements arranged around a central axis. Ideally, one kind of herb is planted in each block, for bold colour and texture. Less is more – **so simplicity is key**.

It's an **ideal picking garden**, because everything is so accessible. But it can be labour intensive, because hedges need to be clipped, pathways weeded and herbs kept trimmed and in their spaces. It can also be expensive to build.

The most productive herb and vegetable gardens are usually based on formal designs.

I find working with **a grid of 40cm** (16in) squares the easiest way to churn out formal herb garden designs. Most perennial herbs fit comfortable into this measurement and 40cm is also the minimum width suitable for a path. By simply adding in a few diamonds and circles the possibilities become endless.



The best formal design **for a complete novice** consists of two paths intersecting at their midpoints – according to the ancients, the resulting cross would frighten off evil spirits. You can plant one or more herbs into each of the resulting squares.

As your enthusiasm and expertise grows you can easily add to this basic design by forming a path around the perimeter or by extending the crossed paths.

For a classic touch place a sundial, statue or decorative pot in the centre where the paths intersect.

Another popular formal design is **the wagon wheel**. (See page 37) You can use bricks or stones for the spokes and rim, with your herbs in the pie-shaped segments in between.

If you are an old hand at herb gardening you can try a knot garden formed by planting herbs in continuous rope-like hedges to form the spokes and rim.

## Informal herb gardens

Michael Kressy state that for many people, the term “herb” triggers thoughts of intricate gardens planned and planted with slide ruler accuracy.

But herbs have a fun-filled side as well. Allowed a modest amount of freedom, they can become delightfully shaggy. Making your garden truly a place of rest and relaxation.

The mints are a good example. We often frown on their undisciplined growth. But a sea of spearmint crowding a lawn or walkway offers repeated bouquets of fragrance whenever nipped by the lawnmower or trampled underfoot.

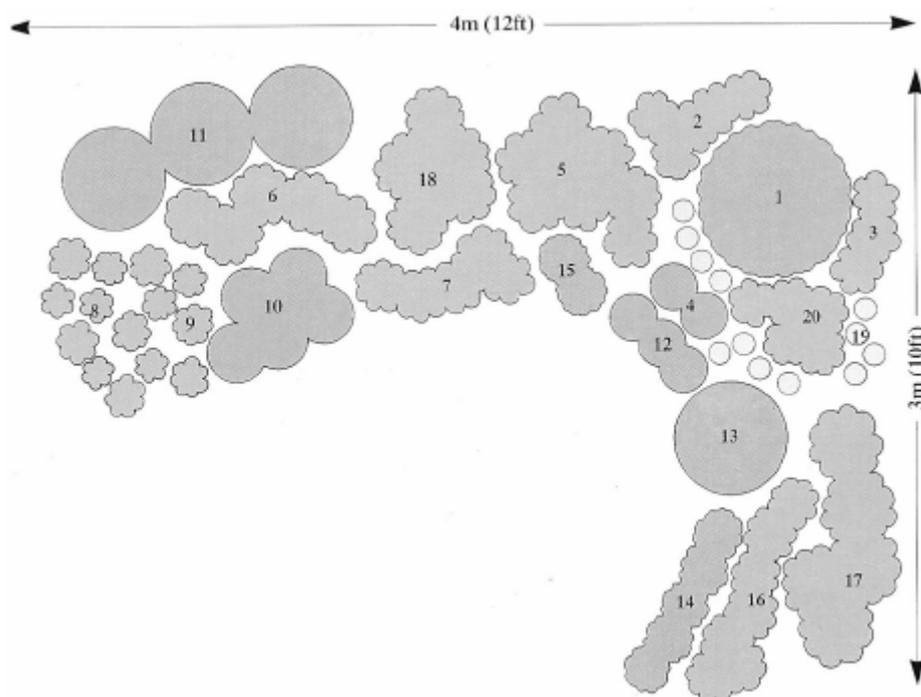
Not the mention the mark of a wildly successful herb gardener – an abundant harvest.

An **informal** garden fits in more easily with most contemporary gardens and homes. The lines are **more flowing**, with curved beds and walkways that give plenty of scope for growing a wide variety of herbs.

Think cottage garden or the traditional herbaceous borders for good examples.

The aesthetic effect depends on **plant combinations and groupings**. It’s an attempt to imitate how Mother Nature does it.

Being informal, flowers and shrubs can be added. Although the look is more exuberant, a good plan is still very important.



An informal design usually needs less initial structural work and is **easier** and less costly to maintain.

I also use a 40cm grid when planning an informal herb garden or bed.

## Action Plan - Step 4: Brainstorm design ideas

Turn to page 6 of your *Basic Design Concepts for Sustainable Landscapes* booklet. Study the section on “Creating a scaled drawing of the design.”

Next...

Grab a piece of grid paper and brainstorm at least three designs for your herb garden before deciding on your final design.

Follow Virgil Thomson’s advice: “*Let your mind alone, and see what happens.*”

## Select your herbs

Careful herb selection is the **key** to developing a sustainable herb garden. If your selected herbs thrive in your garden you will greatly reduce the need for water, fertiliser, labour and pesticides.

You need to match the character of the herb with the character of your garden. To be a **wildly successful match-maker** you simply need some basic information about herbs in general. Information that will enable you to read, and understand, a herb label in the nursery, or the description in a book.

### Herb types – the botanist view

You will remember from the chapter on *Understanding your garden* that you can classify herbs according to their hardiness. But that's just one of the things that make up their characters and how good a match they will be for your garden.

You also need to know their life cycles and how they grow.

Ready to give it a bash?

#### Annuals and biennials

The name 'annual' come from the Latin *annus*, meaning 'year'. And that's how long these herbs take to grow from seed, flower, have sex, make more seed, and die.

You can select from two types: hardy annuals and half hardy annuals. The hardy annuals such as nasturtium can withstand the cold. So you can sow them outdoors in spring or autumn.

The half-hardy annuals such as basil will die if you expose them to the cold. The first autumn frost usually marks the end of their life. Even if they haven't completed their life cycle yet.

The name 'biennial' is also from Latin – this time *biennis*. Meaning 'two years'. No prizes for guessing that biennials don't flower in the year they are sown but in the following one. A good example of a biennial is parsley.

From a planning and design perspective try to keep your annuals and biennials grouped together in the garden. This ensures that you don't need to disturb your prize perennial herbs when you need to replace the annuals.

#### Perennials

This time the Latin word is '*perennis*' and it means 'many years'. Herbs living for at least three years.

Unless qualified it normally denotes a herbaceous perennial. Which simply means the herb 'disappear' in winter. In fact, they die back to a rootstock to protect next years shoots which appear magically each spring.

Sometimes catalogues will use the term perennial rather loosely. You'll find descriptions such as clump-forming, creeping, mat-forming and even shrubby.

In the end it doesn't really matter. As long as you know it's a perennial you can ensure that you plan for a more permanent position in the garden.

### Shrubs and trees

Shrubs, like rosemary and lavender, have woody branches but no trunk.

Trees, like bay, always have branches and (normally) a single trunk.

Ensure that you plan properly for your shrubs and trees as they will remain in the same position for many years.

### Climbers

Climbers are lazy. Rather than growing a self-supporting trunk themselves they rely on something else for support. Jasmine is a good example of a climber you'll find in a herb garden.

Climbers also need special planning as you have to provide them with support.

### Bulbs, corms, tubers and rhizomes

Although we tend to refer to all of them as 'bulbs' they are not the same.

A true **bulb** pop up in spring, flower, the leaves hang around for a bit and by summer they've disappeared – until next spring. The bulb is a modified stem. Good examples are garlic, chives and onions.

**Corms** such as the saffron crocus are enlarged stem bases, and each year a new corm grows from a bud on the current year's one.

**Tubers** such as the potato are stems or roots that have swollen with food stores.

**Rhizomes** such as ginger, and turmeric are modified stems that creep horizontally underground and produce roots.

The reason why 'bulbs' go to all this bother is that it's part of their survival kit. Many of them live in places where the weather gets extreme. So they have developed a lifecycle where they 'do their thing' and then get back to safety below ground before the harsh weather sets in.

From a gardening point of view most of them need 'special treatment' and therefore gardeners think they are difficult to grow. This is not true. Anybody can grow them successfully.

Plan a special place for them. They also do exceptionally well in containers.

### Evergreen and deciduous

**Evergreen** is self-explanatory. They are the herbs that have leaves all year round. They lose their leaves sporadically throughout the year.

**Deciduous** herbs are bare in winter, put out new leaves in spring and then drop them in autumn. Lemon verbena is a good example of a deciduous herb.

Don't use a deciduous herb as a focal point. Unless you want a rather bare focus in winter.

### Learn their proper names

You wouldn't dare calling a friend or relative by any other name than their own. Unless it's your day for being rude. Nor would you call your potato salad an apple salad. You'll just confuse your diners.

The same goes for your herbs.

In 1737 Swedish naturalist Carl Linne, also known as Carolus Linnaeus (1707 – 1778), developed his Latin binomial genus-and-species system based on reproductive characteristics.

To this day, according to internationally accepted rules, all species is always identified by two technical names. With plants this is known as the **botanical name** or the species name.

Botanical names are in **Latin** and they are used uniformly all over the world. For example, a species of hedge roses is called *Rosa multiflora*. Such species names should always be either underlined or printed in italics and the first word, which identifies the genus to which the species belong, should be capitalised.

The reason why botanical names are so important to herbalists is that they are **used uniformly all over the world**, whilst the common names are not. For example, if I speak of thyme you would not know if I refer to *Thymus vulgaris* or *Thymus citriodorus*.

As the English language contains many words from Latin a lot of these botanical names look quite familiar.

For example, the English word "foliage" comes from the Latin *folium*, meaning "leaf". When you see the botanical name *Trifolium pratense* (red clover) you can quickly figure out that this is a three-leaved plant. The same goes for *Morinda citrifolia*, whose name means "citrus leaved".

One word you will often see in the species name is *officinalis*. This Latin word means "of a storeroom" and it is related to our "office" and "official". *Officinal* herbs were "authorized herbs" so to speak, or herbs "officially recognized" for their medicinal use, and today the word simply means "medicinal". When you see this word appears in a botanical name you therefore know that this herb has a long history of medicinal use.

Sometimes the botanical name will indicate where the plant originates from. The botanical name of *Hydrocotyle asiatica* (gotu kola or pennywort), indicates that the herb originates from the continent of Asia. Others that you will see quite often are "canadensis" – from Canada, and "africana", "affra" and "caffra" – from Africa.

For a few herbs the botanical name reflects one of the traditional uses for the herb. For example, *Turnera aphrodisiaca* (damiana) is noted for its ability to increase sex drive.

Safflowers have been used since antiquity to make a yellow dye. This is indicated by its botanical name, *Carthamus tinctorius*. “Tinctorius”, which is related to our word “tincture”, means “used for dyes”. The botanical name for valerian, *Valeriana officinalis*, comes from the Latin “valere”, which means “to be in good health”.

The botanical name for garlic, *Allium sativum*, contains the Latin “sativum” which means cultivated or planted deliberately. Others, such as saffron (*Crocus sativus*), and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) contains the designations “sativus” and “sativa. All indicating that these plants are cultivated.

Unless you are a botanist, or horticulturist, it is not necessary to know every botanical name you come across.

However, if after working through the above section you find yourself paying a little more attention to the botanical names of herbs, our goal will have been met. As time goes by you will be surprised at how many you will remember.

Kindly note that I’m not advocating the use of botanical names to the exclusion of common names.

Common names are very useful, often even more descriptive than the botanical names, and at times even poetic. But botanical names are extremely useful to prevent confusion and to delineate exactly which plant we mean.

## Select your theme

Selection involves more than just selecting plants that will thrive in your garden. It involves selecting herbs that **fire your enthusiasm**.

This is also one of the fascinating aspects of herbs. You can focus on a **theme** within a theme. You don’t need to be a master chef. You can just focus on making mouth-watering dips and sauces. Or whatever tickles your fancy.

If you intend growing herbs for profit you will call your theme your **niche**. The selection of this niche will be key to your business success.

I’ve compiled a whole bunch of **theme gardens** for you to get your creative juices flowing. The lists for most of the theme gardens are by no means complete. I’ve simply focused on the “must have’s” for each theme. Feel free to add or delete herbs.

## For the naked chef – apologies to Jamie

If your aim is making mouth-watering dishes your choice of herbs will be guided by your taste buds.

Don’t be afraid to smell and taste the herbs in the nursery before you buy them. If the taste puts you off you can still consider buying it. But if the smell puts you off. Rather leave it for the time being.

You will find most of the following herbs in any self-respecting cook’s herb garden (those in bold are the 9 major culinary herbs):

- **Basil**
- Bay tree
- Borage
- Chervil
- **Chives** and/or Garlic Chives
- Coriander (Cilantro)
- Dill
- Fennel
- Garlic
- **Marjoram** and/or Oregano
- **Mint** or Spearmint
- **Parsley** (preferably Italian)
- **Rosemary**
- **Sage**
- **Savory**
- Sorrel
- Tarragon
- **Thyme**

### Kitchen Garden or Potager

In gardens where space is at a premium, many people forego the pleasure of growing their own fresh produce. But shortage of space can be a challenge. As gardeners in France have shown by devising the potager – an ornamental, formal garden in which herbs mingle with fruit and vegetables.

A potager is simply a kitchen garden. But the term is used, increasingly, to mean a kitchen garden that has been laid out in a decorative manner.

To combine herbs and veggies that have the same cultural requirements is one of the most rewarding theme's to explore.

Here's more culinary theme ideas:

- **Bouquets Garnis** for specific dishes – especially nice for window boxes or containers
- Herbs for your **favourite dishes** – this is a very personal selection.
- **Ethnic cooking** – French, Indian, Chinese, Mexican, Mediterranean, etc.
- **Edible flowers** - Bergamot, French lavender, rosemary, basil, pineapple sage, hyssop, nasturtium, sage, and lemon thyme .
- **Herb and veggie combinations** – E.g. all the herbs that go well with your tomatoes.

### Herbs for your health

Your selection of herbs will be guided by the ailments you want to cure. A good starting point for the aspiring home remedy student will be a first aid herb garden.

### First aid herb garden

This selection will consist of herbs, which provide relief for anything from a headache to a sprained ankle. A list for the beginner will consist of:

- **thyme** for respiratory upsets, coughs, colds and wounds
- **sage** for sore throats and coughs
- **yarrow** for colds, wounds and women's health issues
- **hyssop** for chest colds and digestive disorders
- **parsley** as a general tonic
- **peppermint** for digestive upsets, colds, headaches
- **comfrey** for slow healing minor injuries
- **catnip** for insomnia and to soothe the nerves

Or how about a herb garden just to....

### Soothe your nerves

Sounds like a great idea for the modern family. Select from the following:

- **Catnip** works especially well for the smaller members of the family
- **Lemon balm** for the teenagers. Puberty. Exam stress. Also works well for tantrum toddlers.
- **Chamomile** - especially for mom during PMS
- **Hyssop** for dad - especially if you combine it with lemon balm
- **Feverfew** – will work wonders for those tension headaches and migraines
- **Lavender** – works wonders if you can't really put your finger on the cause of the tension

### Herbs for beauty - making your own skin care products

This is becoming a very popular theme. Again you will be guided by those herbs that have an affinity for your skin and hair. Here's a selection of herbs you can use in hair care products to get those creative juices flowing:

- **For light hair:** chamomile flowers.
- **For dark hair:** rosemary, sage.
- **To condition dry hair:** comfrey, parsley, sage.

- **To condition greasy hair:** calendula, lemon juice, lemon balm, lavender, mints, rosemary, southernwood, yarrow.
- **To prevent dandruff:** chamomile, garlic and onion (powerful but unpleasant smell), parsley, rosemary, southernwood, thyme.
- **To soothe scalp irritation:** catmint, chamomile, comfrey.
- **To provide a hair tonic** (giving body and lustre): calendula, nasturtium, parsley, rosemary, sage, southernwood, watercress.

### For their aroma and beauty

Your possibilities are almost endless.

#### Bee Herb Garden

Bees are a garden's best friend because they pollinate the flowers. But, don't limit yourself to only herbs. Just beware if someone in your family is allergic to bees.

Basil, bay, bergamot, borage, catnip, chamomile, fennel, hyssop, lavender, lemon balm, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, savoury, and thyme.

#### Fragrant Herb Garden

A garden designed for fragrances is a delight to all senses.

Use angelica, basil, bergamot, catnip, chamomile, scented geraniums, heliotrope, hyssop, lavender, lemon balm, lemon verbena, marjoram, mint, pennyroyal, rosemary, sage, savoury, southernwood, tansy, thyme.

#### Patio Herb Garden

Plan a patio herb garden in containers for year-round flavour and fragrance.

Try basil, chervil, chives, dill, fennel, lavender, lemon balm, lemon verbena, marjoram, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, tarragon, and thyme. Be sure to provide adequate light!

#### Gray and Silver Herb Garden

Grey and silver gardens are an old tradition in English Gardening.

Some plants to use are: apple mint, calamint, sage, lavender cotton, horehound, lamb's ear, lavender, silver thyme, and yarrow.

#### Butterfly Herb Garden

Butterflies are the ballerina's of the garden. They are a delight to watch, dancing from flower to flower.

Herbs that invite butterflies are bergamot, borage, calamint, catmint, catnip, comfrey, hyssop.

### Potpourri Herb Garden

The Greeks and Roman's first made pot pourri to perfume their homes. It's a much nicer, and healthier alternative, to all these commercial air fresheners!

Try rose geranium, lemon balm, pennyroyal, rosemary, lavender, lemon verbena, marjoram.

### For the romance

If you are the romantic type. Like most of us. Don't discard the following ideas:

### Shakespeare Herb Garden

The following are non-poisonous plants mentioned in the writings of Shakespeare. All were popular in Elizabethan England.

Bay, calendula, carnation, chamomile, hyssop, lavender, lemon balm, marjoram, mint, mustard, myrtle, parsley, pinks (dianthus), rose, rosemary, salad burnet, savoury, strawberry, and thyme.

### Medieval Herb Garden

These are among the plants that were protected within the walled monastery gardens during the Middle Ages. Quite a large number of these plants are *official* medicinal herbs. They have '*officinalis*' as part of their botanical names.

Angelica, caraway, chives, iris, lavender, lemon balm, marjoram, mint, pinks, rose, rosemary, sage, santolina, and southernwood.

### Biblical Herb Garden

There's a very long list of plants that are mentioned in the Bible. It makes for a very interesting theme.

Start with mint, lemon grass, holy basil, hyssop, rue, bay, oregano and rock rose and then carry on with your own research!

### English Cottage Herb Garden

There's a big swing back to cottage gardens, mainly because of a lack of space and the freedom it gives us go for an eclectic mix of plants.

Start with English lavender, feverfew, santolina, lovage, mint, scented geraniums.

### Tea for Two Herb Garden

There's nothing nicer than making your own herb tea.

My favourites are bergamot, catnip, lemon verbena, lemon thyme, rose geranium, chamomile, chocolate mint, English lavender, lemon balm.

## Action Plan – Step 5: Compile your herb list

Start by selecting a **broad theme**. Culinary, medicinal, cosmetics, etc.

Next make a **complete list** of all the herbs that will fit in with your theme.

Before you set your heart on any of the herbs on your list, check with your local nursery. Are they available? Plants, seedlings or seed? Scratch out all those that are not available. Your **Bouquet Garni Herb Catalogue** will come in very handy here.

Next make three columns. Name them - Must have. Nice to have. Not necessary. Or any other headings that are appropriate to your needs. You are simply trying to **avoid the mistake** of starting with too many herbs. Try reducing your list to about 5 or 10 herbs – that's a good number to start with.

**“It's better to know a few herbs well, than a smattering of many.”**

## Successful planning tools

You've already covered a lot. Let's recap...

- you defined the focus of your garden,
- you did a complete survey of your garden and you know its characteristics,
- you identified the perfect spot for your herb garden,
- brainstormed design ideas,
- compiled a short-list of the herbs you like to grow in your garden

Armed with the above wildly successful herb gardeners use four planning tools to ensure that their gardens yield a harvest when they want and in the quantities they need.

They are the Planting Plan, the Planting Guide, the Gardening Calendar and the Garden Record.

Do not become discouraged at the formidable sound of the above sentence and decide that after all you do not want to fuss so much over your garden. That you are doing it just for the fun and such 'administration' will not be worth bothering with.

In the average small herb garden there is a very large percentage of waste—for two months, more basil than can be eaten, given away or processed, and then, for ten months, none at all, for instance.

With the help of these planning tools you will be able to determine, as nearly as possible, how much of each herb you require for a continuous supply.

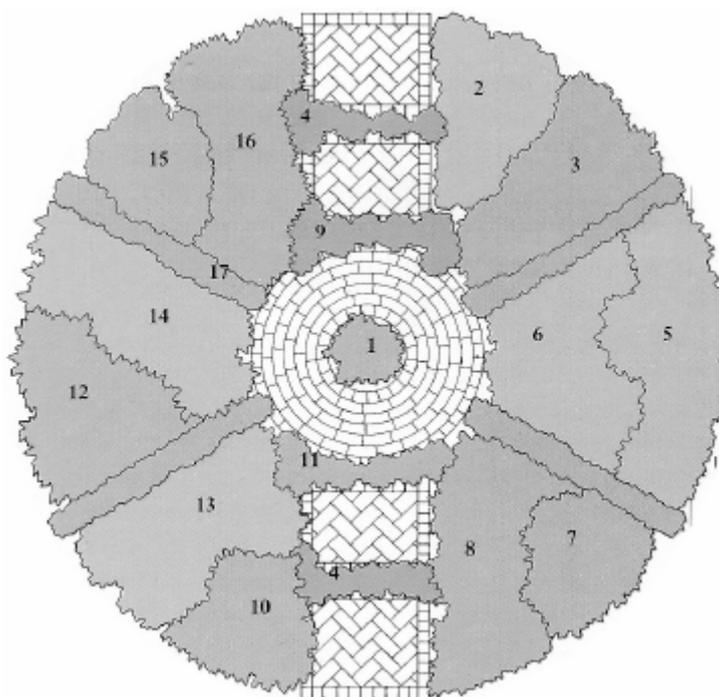
### The planting plan

This is simply a diagram that shows the position of each herb in the bed. It allows you to make costly mistakes 'on paper', not in the garden. If you are container gardening you won't need a planting plan. You can move your containers around.

Use the following tips when making your planting plan:

- Gridded paper makes the job easier. (Remember the 40cm grid.)
- Give each herb/plant a symbol. Make cut-outs if you want to play around with them on the plan.
- Work out the **number** of plants per bed. You'll need to know the spread and height of each herb. Use the information in your **Planting Table**.
- Don't overcrowd. Even in informal herb gardens you want to **give space** to each herb so you can see it and easily harvest it.

- **Experiment** with combining different colours, textures and form for the most interesting look.
- Use **repetition** to create a sense of harmony.
- **Mass** three, five or more herbs of the same variety together to make a statement. Don't dot them around.
- Be aware of the **lifecycles** of the herbs you intend growing. Use perennials to provide the framework, and annual herbs for seasonal interest.
- Allow for **succession** planting. (See the section later in this chapter)
- **Don't ignore height**; otherwise the effect can look haphazard. Taller herbs are best planted to the back.



- Position your plants according to the sun and shade. Herbs like parsley, mint, lemon balm, can take a little shade.
- Keep your **invasive** herbs, like mint, separate. Either in pots or contained by paving.
- Every hour spent on the planting plan will mean several hours saved in the garden. But beware of **analysis paralysis**.

## The planting guide

The planting guide is the next important tool in your arsenal, especially for the beginner. In it you can see at a glance all the details of the particular treatment each herb requires— when to sow, how deep, how far apart the rows should be, etc.

It's also a great aid in drawing your planting plan. You'll find most of the information you need in your Bouquet Garni Catalogue. 'Sowing guides' in seed catalogues are also useful sources of information.

In part two of this program I share my complete planting guide with you. Simply adapt it to your own needs and garden.

### The gardening calendar

The gardening calendar, or checklist, is simply a tool that will prevent anything from being overlooked or left until too late. It's your 'To Do List.'

Use the information in your Planting Guide and simply list the tasks to be done each month (or week). Cross them off as you attend to them.

As your first Gardening Calendar will be based on general information you'll need to update it as you go. In part two you'll get a general calendar that will save you the time of doing your own from scratch.

### The garden record

The garden record is no less important. It may be kept in the simplest sort of way, but be sure to keep it. Allocate a single page for each herb or if you are computer literate use a spreadsheet or word processor.

Useful information to record are: sowing, planting and transplanting dates; seed and plant sources; harvesting dates; yield; occurrence of pests and diseases; quality and costs incurred.

### Useful gardening concepts

Here's a few useful concepts wildly successful herb gardeners use that you might like to consider:

#### Crop rotation

Crop rotation has been practised for generations by vegetable gardeners as a simple and effective precaution against pest and disease. The basic idea is that if you grow the same type of plant on the same patch of ground year after year, the soil will harbour pest and disease from one season to the next.

If you move the crop to another piece of ground the pest and disease will lose their host and will die out.

Crop rotation, although it is admirable in theory, is not that important in the herb garden. When pressed for space one does not have the luxury of having four or five beds in rotation. It's also essentially a tool for annual crops.

Not that I'm saying crop rotation is unimportant. But as a herb gardener don't lose any sleep over it.

### Intercropping

Few herb gardeners have enough space to grow everything they wish. Every available piece of soil needs to be used effectively.

One way of achieving this is with intercropping. This simply means that you plant quick growing herbs (and veggies) amongst the slower growing ones. You are then able to harvest the quick-growing ones before their slower bedfellows can fill their space.

Intercropping can also be done purely for the decorative value. A simple example is to intercrop red-leaved lettuce with green ones or with chervil.

### Companion planting

When intercropping is practised for reasons other than space saving and the decorative value it is called companion planting.

“Plants are conscious of the company they keep. Some help other plants to grow, while other repel insects or even other plants. And there is no accounting for tastes – plants prefer some strange bedfellows...” - Pamela Allardice

Although you may think of companion planting as a relatively new concept, it has, in fact, been practiced for centuries. The ancient Roman agriculturist, Varro, declared: “Large walnut trees close by make the border of the farm sterile.” Nearly two thousand years later, Canadians in Ontario reached the same conclusion.

Companion planting can become quite mysterious, entering the realm of folklore with claims that cannot be proven. Most of these claims apply to the vegetable garden and not the herb garden as such.

So, unless you are considering a kitchen garden with herbs and veggies, don't lose any sleep over companion planting.

*Roses are red,  
Lavender's blue;  
Peas say to garlic:  
'Oh, how I hate you!'*

### Succession Planting

The last concept to consider is succession sowing and planting. The idea behind this is to phase your annual crops (herbs) so that you have a continuous harvest and not a series of sudden gluts.

For most annual herbs this means that you'll plant a third of the row or block, wait two or three weeks and plant another third, and finally the last section two or three weeks later still.

The result is that you'll be able to harvest the herb for a couple of months instead of just two or three weeks.

There may, of course, be times when you do not want to spread the harvesting. For example, if you prefer making and freezing your pesto for winter use in one go, it's easier if all your basil is ready for harvest at the same time.

In part three you'll learn the ins and outs of harvesting and preserving your herbs.

### More planning resources

There are heaps of resources to help you in your planning. Remember that planning is a process, not an event.

- Most herb books offer suggestions relating to specific conditions such as coastal gardens, dry gardens and shady gardens.
- Browse through gardening encyclopaedias to get design ideas.
- Gardening magazines have sections and features on specific plants and styles.
- Have a walk around your neighbourhood. Look at what is growing well in other people's gardens. Identify gardens that look wildly successful. Get to know the gardener.
- Join a local gardening club and talk to other gardeners. Your local garden centre will have a contact name for you. Just ask.
- Keep a garden notebook handy and jot down plants you see and like. Don't worry. If somebody asks what you're doing tell them you are a researcher.
- Surf the web.

### Action Plan – Step 6: Prepare your planting plan

It's time to prepare your own planting plan. Don't try to be perfect. Accept that there will be a few mistakes. Having a plan will however enable you to prevent those mistakes in your next planting plan.

*“Aim for success, not perfection. Never give up your right to be wrong, because then you will lose the ability to learn new things and move forward with your life.”* - Dr. David M. Burns

There you have it. You have your own herb garden plan in your hands.

And you thought it was impossible to plan your own herb garden. Don't you agree with Walt Disney?...

***It's kind of fun to do the impossible.***

## Preparing the ground

Armed with your planting plan, you are just about ready to rush off to the nursery to purchase the herbs for your wildly successful garden.

But before you do, it's essential that you take the necessary steps to ensure a well-prepared fertile soil.

The amount of soil preparation you need to do will depend on the conditions in your garden. Use your analysis of your garden and your common sense to decide what needs to be done. Rather err on the side of doing too much than doing too little.

If you are starting out by growing in containers, and you are going to buy a ready-made potting soil for your containers, you can safely skip this section and jump to the *Let's go shopping* chapter.

### Clear the rubbish

Start your ground preparation by marking out the position of the beds and clearing the area. Dig out that prize winning roses, lawn, old shrubs, etc. Anything and everything that's not welcome in your herb garden.

Keep an eye out for perennial weeds. Make sure that you get every little piece of root, rhizome or whatever. Don't be hasty. Time spent now will repay you a hundred times in lower maintenance once your herbs are established.

Once you've cleared the area try to get it as level as possible.

### Install the hard elements

If your design includes hard elements such as permanent paths, features or raised beds install them before you start with your soil improvement.

Once you're done, admire your hard work – or pay the contractor – and clear the building rubble.

### Improve the soil

With the area cleared and the hard elements installed it's time to improve the soil. Really good garden soils don't just happen. They are crafted by clever gardeners working with Nature.

What they do is simple. They improve the structure and drainage of the soil to make it easier for the plant roots to grow in, and at the same time they provide sufficient nutrients for both the plants and the soil organisms.

The best way of doing this is by digging in lots of well-rotted bulky organic material and applying some general organic fertilizer such as blood, bone or fish meal.

The organic material improves soil structure, as does the digging, and as it breaks down it also releases small amount of nutrients. This is what clever gardeners mean by “feed the soil not the plant.”

You’ll be amazed at the range of organic conditioners available to improve your soil. Some are free (if you don’t count the time taken in ‘making’ or carting them), other’s are relatively cheap, while those bought by the bag can be expensive.

In part two of this program you’ll get to know them a bit better and you’ll even learn how to make your own compost.

For starters the easiest is to buy some compost or manure from your nursery and dig them in. As a general rule of thumb dig in one large bag (60dm) of compost, or manure, per square meter. Don’t forget to add one handful of general organic fertilizer such as blood, bone or fishmeal per square meter.

### Digging

Without doubt this is the most fundamental and hated of all gardening activities. So why do you need to do it? Apart from providing chiropractors with a living, it’s the commonest way to create a rich, fertile and ultimately productive soil.

It can be hard work at the outset, especially on sites not cultivated for some time, but the results – in the form of a wildly successful herb crop – are worth it.

Done properly, digging increases the amount of air space in the soil. It ‘fluffs up’ the soil. This benefits the soil organisms and roots due to the increase in oxygen available to them. It also lets you add organic matter that will feed your soil.

Winter is the commonest time to dig, but you can dig at any time of the year if the conditions are right. Avoid digging when the soil is too dry and impenetrable, or too wet and sticking to your tools and footwear

### How to dig

1. Start by digging a single trench across the width of the herb bed. Make the trench a single spit (spade length) deep and 2 spits wide. Pile the soil from the trench at the other end of the bed you’re digging, or onto a wheelbarrow.
2. Add a 5cm to 10cm layer of organic matter and a handful or two organic fertilizer to the bottom of the trench. Break up the soil at the bottom with a fork. Working in the organic material as you proceed.
3. Dig the next trench in the bed with your spade, turning each spade load of soil so it lands upside down in the first trench. Covering the broken soil and worked in organic material.
4. Repeat step 2 and 3 down the length of the bed. Fill in the last trench with the soil from the first trench.
5. Remember to remove any weeds roots, stones and rubble as you go.

### Tips for digging

Digging can be hard work. Follow the tips given below to avoid strains and injuries.

1. Use a spade that is right for you and the job. It should be a little higher than hip height when held vertically.
2. Start with a small area. Pace yourself and avoid straining your back by keeping your back straight at all times.
3. Do not try to lift more than you can handle. You will dig for longer periods of time by taking smaller amounts.
4. As you work, try to establish a rhythm that you can maintain at all times.

### Action Plan – Step 7: Prepare the ground

It's time to start putting your planning into practice. Follow the advice above and the action steps given below, to ensure that your herbs get the best possible start you can afford.

1. Measure out the bed(s)
2. Clear the area
3. Install the hard landscaping elements such as paving, etc.
4. Improve the soil.

Done...?

## Let's go shopping

Invite a friend or two, grab your shopping list and let's go shopping for healthy herbs to plant in your garden.

At first glance all the herbs in the nursery will look lush and glorious. Usually they are. (Especially those on a Bouquet Garni stand.) Here's a few quick checks master gardeners use that will prevent you from bringing home a lemon.

## How to choose a healthy herb

Print the checklist below and take it on your shopping trip.

### Quality of the nursery

Take an overview of the plants in the nursery. Do they all seem healthy and well cared for? If you have doubts rather visit the next nursery.

### Flowers

Flowers can be misleading. Try your best not to buy a herb simply because it's in flower. First perform the rest of the checks. If all seems fine, indulge. Beware of annuals that are in flower. It means that they are near the end of their lifecycle.

As herbs without flowers transplant better than those in flower you will anyway remove the flowers when you plant them in your garden.

### Leaves

Evaluate the general condition of the herb. Are the leaves green, shiny and lush? Avoid any plants that are wilting or yellowing. They may or may not recover.

Inspect the leaves closely for signs of insects or disease. Check both sides of the leaves. Look for blackened areas, holes, spots, mushy areas, stickiness and distortions.

Don't reject a herb just on account of a few holes.

### Shape

Consider the shape of the herb. Is it compact and full with multiple stems? The bushy herbs will normally produce a better harvest than the long leggy ones.

Choose trees and standard plants with a strong, straight trunk or stem. Look for scars or damage on the stem or trunk.

Avoid herbs with broken stems and branches.

### Potting soil in the pot

Check for weeds and moss. Weeds are a freebie you don't want. It usually signal some neglect on the part of the nursery staff. Nothing more.

Moss indicate over-watering or a nutrient shortage.

Don't reject a great plant just on account of a few weeds and bits of moss.

### Roots

Knock off the pot – gently! And take a look. A good herb will fill its pot with roots.

If you can't knock off the pot, its "pot-bound", but if it's healthy, buy it. It's obviously a good grower.

If there aren't many roots and a whole heap of potting soil falls it's too small. Put it back.

### When all is said and done...

If you've just got to have the herb, go ahead and buy it. With a little bit of pampering, it just may defy the odds.

## Garden tools

Only a handful of tools are necessary for a small herb garden. It's better to invest in high-grade tools that will serve you well for many years.

In most instances, the only tools needed are a spade, fork, hoe, rake, watering can and watering hose to water all parts of the garden. A wheelbarrow can be helpful if the garden is larger and a trowel is perfect for weeding, planting small plants and tinkering with pots on the patio.

You'll also need secateurs for pruning, cutting back and trimming your herbs. There are two types: "**bypass**" – two sharp blades cross each other like scissors; and "**anvil**" – one sharp blade cuts on to a flattened base. I prefer the former, but it's a personal choice.

A pair of good garden gloves are also a good investment.

## Action Plan – Step 8: Go shopping

It's as simple as that. Just go shopping. Thanks to the plastic plant pot, herbs are grown, sold and planted all year round.

If you have to run other errands as well make the nursery the last stop on your run. Don't make the mistake of thinking herbs – or any plant for that matter – can survive for hours in a hot boot. They can't.

Buy the plants, drive home immediately and unpack them before you do anything else.

## Planting your herbs

One of the most important elements of a wildly successful herb garden is the actual planting, or transplanting, of the herbs in the garden or in containers. The Americans have a saying: “**Never plant a 10 dollar plant in a 10 cent hole**”. Follow their advice. If you “spend as much on the hole as on the plant” you can’t go wrong.

But if you shove them into too small a hole and ignore them, don’t be surprised when they sulk and die.

Follow the steps master gardeners use when planting their herbs. Shower them with tender loving care and they will thrive.

### How to plant in the garden

Give all the herbs a **thorough soaking** to ensure that their root balls are wet. The best way to do this is to stand them in a bucket of water for at least an hour. Dry root balls are difficult to wet thoroughly once underground and often result in losses.

Remove all flowers and buds if present. (Unless that’s your reason for planting the herb.) You want the herb to focus its energy on establishing itself. Not on reproduction.

Look at the shape of the herb and trim back stems that are out of shape. Also remove dead leaves and stems. At the same time **pinch out the growing tips** to encourage nice bushy growth. The growing tips are the last pair of leaves on each stem.

Next, transfer your planting plan to your prepared herb bed. Place all the pots of herbs in the positions they will occupy in the bed. This allows you to check spacing and the overall effect before you commit to planting.

If you are satisfied with what you see, proceed with planting each herb:

1. Dig a planting hole about twice the diameter of the pot and at least twice as deep as the pot is tall. Fill about half the hole with well-rotted organic matter and fork it into the soil. Firm the soil in the middle of the planting hole down gently.
2. Knock the herb from its pot and tease a few of the biggest roots out of the mass of the root ball. If it’s a seriously pot-bound herb you may give the root ball a heavy teasing. If in doubt – rather err on the side of teasing too little. New roots will eventually find their way out as they grow.
3. Stand the herb in the middle of the planting hole. Most herbs, just like people, have a ‘best side’. So get someone to turn it while you look. If you’re happy with the way it faces check that the top of the root ball is level with the surrounding soil (the upper rim of the hole), and that the herb is standing upright, not leaning over at a drunken angle.
4. Mix half and half organic matter and soil and backfill around the root ball, firming it down gently with your hands.

5. Once the soil is level, give your herbs a good water in and spread a 5cm to 10cm mulch in the bed.

### How to plant in containers

Planting in containers does not differ much from planting in the garden. Start with a good potting soil and a container with ample drainage holes and success is virtually guaranteed.

Prepare your herbs as you would for planting them in the garden. Ensure their root balls are wet and that they are trimmed and in shape. Also ensure that your potting soil is slightly moist as it absorbs water so much better after planting.

1. Cover the drainage holes with a piece of stocking to prevent soil washing out of the container. If you are using a good quality potting soil it's not necessary to cover the drainage holes with a layer of crocks. This outdated practice actually impairs drainage.
2. Add enough potting soil to the container so that when standing on it, the top of the root ball is about 3cm below the container rim. The watering gap.
3. Knock the herb from its pot and tease a few of the biggest roots out of the mass of the root ball. If it's a seriously pot-bound herb you may give the root ball a heavy teasing. If in doubt – rather err on the side of teasing too little. New roots will eventually find their way out as they grow.
4. Place the herb in its new container and ensure that it's upright. Gently firm potting soil around the root ball, leaving the 3cm watering gap.
5. Water the herb in well – until you see water coming out of the drainage holes. Do this in stages, giving the water time to soak into the potting soil.

### Aftercare

Aftercare is critical, especially during spells of bad weather. So watch your herbs carefully and ensure that they get all the love and attention they need to thrive.

In part two of this program we cover all you need to know to look after your herbs. But before you start with it, it's time to complete your last action step of part one.

### Action Plan – Step 9: Plant your herbs

Need I say more? Just go and do it. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. Herbs are very forgiving.

Once you're done, pour yourself a herb beverage of choice, sit back, relax and feast your eyes on your creation.

Then close your eyes and start dreaming of what you're going to do with your first harvest. But don't dream too long. Some of your herbs will be ready for their 'first cut' within a few short weeks.

## Learn more...

- **How to be a wildly successful herb gardener.  
Part 2: Caring for your wildly successful herb garden.**  
Discover how to water, feed and prune your herbs. You'll also learn how to take care of pests, disease and weeds if the need arise.
- **How to be a wildly successful herb gardener.  
Part 3: Harvesting and preserving your bounty.**  
It's no use having a productive garden and not knowing when and how to harvest and preserve your crop.
- **Timeless Herb Secrets e-newsletter.**  
It is the best way of keeping yourself informed. Just visit <http://www.herb.co.za> and complete the online subscription form. Don't forget to download your free **Bouquet Garni Catalogue** and **Bouquet Garni Herb Info Pack** either. It is essential reading if you are serious about your herb gardening efforts.