



Grows Herbs For Cooking and Decorating

by Sally Bair
Farm Feature Writer

As more and more women are discovering, herbs can add a great deal of interest to otherwise ordinary cooking. It is even more interesting if you grow them yourself, and there is at least one local woman who thinks herbs are attractive and imaginative when used in decorating.

Mrs. Francis Graeff, Sinking Spring RD5, often finds ways to use the sturdier herbs in her arrangements for her home and for flower shows, and she says part of the attraction is the lovely fragrance they give off when disturbed slightly.

The current "back to nature" trend is probably at least partly responsible for the reviving fascination with herbs and herb gardens, but the history of herbs dates back to biblical times. Sarah Graeff names rue, wormwood and hyssop as three herbs which can be found mentioned in the Bible, and these and others have survived to today.

Mrs. Graeff said she has learned a lot about herbs through helping to restore historic homesteads. She has been particularly active in restoring the gardens at the homestead at Hopewell State Park in Birdsboro. She explained that the herb garden will eventually carry varieties of herbs which were found at the time the homestead was flourishing, about 1847. She is especially proud that a variety of mint - apple mint - has been preserved since that time. She brought a cutting home and now has a lovely apple mint plant growing on her property, and she frequently shares it with others.

It was customary in colonial America to "always have the herbs as close to the back door as possible, so that they could be readily used in preparing the meals," Mrs. Graeff says.

She adds, by the way, that the word herb may correctly be pronounced either with a silent or a pronounced "h."

Although Mrs. Graeff's interest in herbs is relatively new, she says her love for flowers was great "even as a little child." She added, "I am very lucky that my husband is as thrilled as I am with growing things." In fact, the Graeffs shared the work in their commercial greenhouse for years before they retired from the business.

About eight years ago she began her herb collection through a friend from the Reading Federated Garden Club who shared slips with her. Mrs. Graeff is also an active member of the Shillington Women's Club and works enthusiastically with their flower club division.

She says acquiring herbs is not difficult, but cautions that some are much more hardy than others. Some seeds germinate very slowly, and may rot in the ground she says.

A good way to start your collection of herbs in the spring is to buy plants from a greenhouse. Mrs. Graeff says it is often possible to get unusual herbs at plant sales sponsored by auxiliaries and garden clubs. But you can also



Mrs. Graeff poses with her prized rosemary plant which appropriately stands near her front door as a symbol of friendship.

start them from slips acquired from a friend. Usually you can start with just a small amount, and they will quickly grow and become abundant in your garden.

Mrs. Graeff says you can safely divide "anything with a good root system." A clump of chives, for instance, may be divided simply by cutting the "system root" apart with a sharp knife. Other herbs, like mint, have a "running root" and, according to Mrs. Graeff, can be readily transplanted.

"A nicely balanced fertile ground is the best place to grow herbs. If your soil tends to clay, add peat moss, clippings or compost to make it more fertile. Herbs also must have sun to be successful," Mrs. Graeff says.

Thyme, chives, garlic chives, rue and horehound are some of the more hardy types of herbs for this climate. All mints are also relatively hardy - pineapple, lemon, orange, blue stem, apple mint and spearmint. Mrs. Graeff grows quite a few mint varieties in her garden - and serves a delicious hot tea to her visitors.

Rosemary is a semihardy herb, Mrs. Graeff says, and she has wintered over her plant for several years by cutting it back and protecting it with a plastic container. She is justifiably proud of her rosemary plant, which in legend is the "plant of friendship." She said the rosemary should always be grown near the front door, and, traditionally, "its lovely fragrance will welcome guests and tempt them to ask for a slip, and in that way you can share it."

Mrs. Graeff warns that the flavor of fresh herbs is "much more pungent than dried herbs found in the store, so care should be used in adding them to foods."

Herbs can be used continuously through their growing season. Mrs. Graeff says even if they begin to flower you can just break off the flower or shear back the plant and it will continue to grow and be productive. In some instances the seed of the herb can be used, so going to seed is simply the first step toward additional use.

If you're unsure about how to use an herb, or at what stage to harvest it, Mrs. Graeff suggests checking herbs in the store, and seeing what state they are in. For instance, she says that a friend of hers saves the seeds of basil as well as using the plant.

Now is the time to harvest herbs for the winter. To dry them, you simply tie a bundle of the herbs and hang them in a dry place until they crumble to the touch. Mrs. Graeff says she likes to place hers near the hot water heater and they will dry in about two weeks. You could also hang the herbs near the furnace or in the attic, but if the drying area is dusty, a paper bag should be used to cover them loosely. When dry, crumble them, put in airtight jars and you'll have a nice supply of herbs for use throughout the winter.

Some herbs can be successfully frozen - just put them in

a plastic bag and store in a well marked freezer container.

Herbs, of course, lend themselves to growing in pots indoors all year round. It is a great joy to have pots of herbs in your kitchen to nip and use at your convenience, and it is a good way to winter over less hardy herbs.

Mrs. Graeff offers the following suggestion for growing parsley in your kitchen. Put parsley seeds in a sponge and soak it with water, then sit back and watch it grow. She says this is a particular challenge for small children, and it makes a conversation piece as well as a useful herb container.

Although many herbs can be wintered over, some will eventually die out after several seasons so Mrs. Graeff says it is good to have a fresh start occasionally so you are not left without your favorite herb.

Mrs. Graeff uses her herbs liberally not only in cooking, but also in decorating. One lovely plant which she often uses is the rue, which has a beautiful gray-green foliage, and therefore can be used for a different accent in arrangements. "Some herbs don't have the substance to hold up in decorating, but a good one is the rose geranium, or mint with zinnias," she says. When using herbs in decorating, you get to enjoy not only the lovely delicate lines, but also the beautiful fragrances of the herbs.

The history of most herbs is little known to the average person, but Mrs. Graeff has learned many of them. Marjoram is known as comfort and consolation, kindness and courtesy. Our lady's bedstraw which Mrs. Graeff grows, is known as the symbol of the nativity because it was found in the manger at the time of Christ's birth. Ivy symbolizes the attachment of eternal friendship, and is recognized as the sign of the trinity.

The aloe plant is used for alum, catnip is an ancient remedy for an upset stomach and yarrow is used in antiseptic. Mrs. Graeff says that the Roman soldiers would brew the chrysanthemum leaf to use for infections. Foxglove, another plant found in Mrs. Graeff's garden, is the source of digitalis which is used commonly for heart ailments.

An old-fashioned favorite, according to Mrs. Graeff, is lavender which was once hung in every closet to keep the air sweet. Mrs. Graeff says it must be hung in mesh bags so they can breathe.

Many Lancaster Countians are familiar with Mrs. Graeff's love of nature through her presentation at the

(Continued On Page 40)



Mrs. Graeff shows one of her arrangements which features the lovely rue to add interest.



Rose geranium is one of the herbs which Mrs. Graeff enjoys using in her decorating.