



"Nothing beats fresh herbs in cooking," Brad Loercher, states emphatically. Showing one of the wide variety of herbs available at his shop in Millersville, Loercher, feels most people can grow them successfully.

## First Herb Garden Should Be Small, Simple

BY SALLY BAIR

Lancaster Co. Correspondent

LANCASTER — Herbs can offer fragrance, good taste, medicinal qualities and just plain beauty.

Brad Loercher, owner of the Parsley Porch in Millersville, says the interest in herbs continues to grow and the primary reason to grow herbs is that they are fun. He says, "Nothing can beat fresh herbs in cooking, and if you grow your own herbs you know exactly what you're getting."

Speaking at a program sponsored by the Penn State Extension Service, Loercher said beginning plots should be small, not exceeding 4 feet by 4 feet, which will give the grower a nice variety.

"Keep the design simple," he advises. "Don't get too formal or too elaborate."

Preparation is the key to success in growing herbs, according to Loercher. "Any soil can be changed to grow herbs."

Herbs will grow best in a soil which has been improved, and one of the best and easiest ways to improve soil is to add humus. Loercher says this can be compost, manure, peat moss or grass clippings, but humus will be the most important addition to any soil.

Loercher said, "Most herbs enjoy a sweet soil." That means the first step is to have the soil analyzed. Usually a little lime should be added during the soil preparation. It is not necessary to add fertilizer, because fertilizer will promote green growth and the herbs may have little taste or smell.

The addition of sand to your soil will promote good drainage. Perlite or vermiculite are other materials which can be used to help with drainage.

Most herbs love sunshine, at least eight hours a day, but some are adaptable and will thrive with less. Loercher urged his audience to be willing to experiment in the location of herbs.

Before making a selection of herbs, Loercher said, gardeners should study the characteristics of individual herbs. Growers should know how high the herbs will grow, and how close together they can be planted. He cautioned not to plant too closely, saying that most require a square foot of space.

For the beginner, Loercher suggested making a plan on paper first, including which herbs are used most often, and where they can be located. A kitchen herb garden, for instance, should be close enough to bring them in easily for use in cooking. Window boxes can be effective for growing

herbs, but must have drainage holes.

Loercher recommended that each herb grower include basil on his list. Basil should be planted after Memorial Day, because it likes warmth and humidity. In addition to sweet basil, there is lettuce leaf basil, which gives the same flavor; opal basil, which is milder but is nice in herbal vinegars; and globe basil, which keeps a compact shape. There are over 25 basil varieties, including licorice and cinnamon. Loercher said if basil is prevented from flowering, they will continue to grow.

Beginners should also grow chives for sure success, Loercher said. Chives enjoy full sun and flowering should be prevented, although the purple flowers are edible. They make a nice addition to a tossed salad. Chives should be cut in half, but not too low to the ground.

Rosemary is a good herb for beginners, and can be used in cooking with pork, lamb and hamburgers. He suggested laying a sprig of rosemary under pizza dough for a nice flavor in the dough. Rosemary is not hardy in this area, with the root system being the tenderest part of the plant. It must be heavily mulched if left outdoors over winter. Creeping rosemary is nice for window boxes, but is stronger than regular rosemary and is not used for cooking. There is also a pine-scented rosemary.

Another "safe" herb for the beginner, according to Loercher, is thyme. English thyme is the most popular and is hardy. There is also lemon thyme which is good with fish and chicken, and silver thyme which has lemon flavor. Woolly

thyme is great for growing between rocks, and there is also lemon creeping thyme.

Oregano is a popular herb, with the Greek variety giving stronger flavor. Loercher said golden oregano grows closer to the ground.

The bi-annual parsley is a popular herb, and Loercher said it needs to be planted two years in a row, so that each year some will be available for use. It is possible to start it from seed; but he said, "It takes the time of seven trips to the devil and back to get it to germinate." It is a good breath freshener as well.

Peppermints grow easily, but Loercher recommended growing them in containers "unless you don't care if they take over." He also cautioned against planting different varieties of mint together or "they will go to meadow mint." There are many mints available, in addition to peppermint and spearmint, there is lime, orange, mountain mint, apple mint and many others.

Sage is another plant that comes in myriad varieties. Ordinary sage may grow as high as four feet, and is hardy, though sage plants often die after about five years. Dwarf sage, with the same flavor, grows about 18 inches high. There is also golden sage, tri-color sage, pineapple sage, which Loercher calls a "fantastic plant." It gives off a fragrance if brushed against, and features a scarlet red flower.

Lemon verbena and lavender both give off wonderful fragrances. It is the flower of lavender that is used in potpourri; they should be cut as they begin to open.

Sweet cicely is an herb which looks like a fern and can be used

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Many varieties of thyme are available for home gardeners. Most thymes are hardy and Loercher says they are a safe plant for the beginner herb gardener. English thyme is the most common variety, but lemon thyme, silver thyme and woolly thyme make interesting additions to the herb garden.

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