

Westminster Gardener Finds Myriad Uses For Home-grown Herbs

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WESTMINSTER, Md.

Gourmet chefs create savory dishes with them. Craftspeople arrange their foliage and flowers into decorative art forms. Homeowners delight in their fragrance both indoors in a simmering pot, and outdoors under foot. And, some would attest to their powers of warding off colds and evil demons.

For Belle Fangmeyer of Westminster, Md., herbs that she cultivates in her eighteenth century garden serve many purposes. They find their way into her soup pots, salads, wreaths, flower baskets, and even into the mouths of colicky babies.

Belle, whose wholesome, attractive appearance rivals that of any "Ivory Girl," said that she "loves natural things." As proprietress of Old Friends Antiques, located in the springhouse of her family's Living Faith Farm, Belle fashions much sought after herbal crafts with old-fashioned skill and know-how. "The store just opened in April. Our business has just been wonderful," she explained. "Most people are buying herbs to hang as decorations."

Relating one incident, Fangmeyer said a customer "took a bunch of everything I had." While her customer was delighted

with her purchases, Fangmeyer said she was concerned that she wouldn't remember what each bunch was when she returned home. "I had to tag them all," she said. Now, Belle says she makes a practice of tagging bunches of herbs so they are really identified both in the shop and once they are part of someone's decorating scheme.

Belle's husband, Dan, and two daughters, Dana and Nicole, also enjoy the benefits of growing herbs. "My husband is in this just as much as I am," she explained. "In February we plan everything." The Fangmeyers also raise Hampshire sheep. They recently purchased the champion Hampshire ram at the Mid-Atlantic Classic Show and Sale in Manheim. As newcomers to the Maryland Hampshire Breeders' Association they hosted the annual picnic at their historic home in July.

The Fangmeyers' country home is listed on the National Historic Register. The ten-room brick house was once the Brethren Meeting House of the area. Built by Christian Royer in 1827, the house boasts five porches, nine fireplaces, and beautiful raised panel walls that fold to create a large space on the first floor. The home is furnished with beautiful period pieces, and Belle has added her special touch with wreaths and



The 18th Century herb garden of Belle and Dan Fangmeyer contains a variety of herbs marked with stones identifying the plants. Their home in the background is listed on the National Historic Register.

arrangements that she has created in her shop.

Herbs grow around the perimeter of the house and in carefully planned gardens. The trunk of a centuries old tree serves as a giant outdoor pot for mints and other culinary herbs. "Basil and oregano are our favorites," she said. "I put basil in about everything. I love the way tarragon and basil smell when they are cooking."

Referring to the culinary herbs in the larger Victorian garden, Belle said "I use almost all this in my fresh salads. Before dinner I come out and pick a few leaves." Shredded like lettuce in a salad, she said the herbs "perk your salad up."

Each plant in the garden is marked with a stone that bears the name of the herb.

Pointing to the Salad Burnet, she said it makes "great dips and spreads with mayonnaise or any salad dressing." The horseradish plant "takes over," according to Belle. She said the root of the plant, when processed in a blender, yields that tangy flavor that so many add to their roast beef sandwiches. She also cautioned against hazards of processing the aromatic root: "I think I smelled like horseradish for three days after that," she chuckled.

The velvety smooth leaf of the rose-scented geranium decorates the top of cakes when Belle places them right on the bottom of the pan and adds batter. After the baking, the leaf has become part of the top of the cake and forms a beautiful design, and "you can eat the leaf," she added.

A popular item with the Fangmeyers' customers is the cooking wreath. Belle assembles the wreaths with dried culinary herbs with flowers added for decoration. Ten inch wreaths sell for \$16.

Pointing to the one in her own kitchen, Belle said the "one thing about a cooking wreath is that, "when it's gone, you've used everything." Her own wreath shows signs of regular use, with a few bare spots where sage once filled the space. Other herbs hang in bunches, decorating the walls and fireplace in the kitchen.

Belle recommends cutting herbs first thing in the morning, so they will hold the oils. She dries her herbs and everlasting flowers in various ways.

"In the sun they will dry quicker, but they lose a lot of fragrance," she explained. "In the smokehouse, I have to leave the door open or they will crumble when they are dry."

The bunches of herbs in the smokehouse hang from old meat hooks that once secured hams over a smoky fire. Belle said she has dried herbs in the oven, with the heat "as low as possible. But, that's when I'm going to crumble them right up and put them into jars." She said she is anxious to try drying herbs in the microwave oven also.

Growing herbs comes easy for Belle, though she said she has learned a lot this year. "I've lost a lot of herbs this year because you need to cut them as soon as they flower." The back of the bushy oregano plant shows signs of new growth where Belle cut them as she should. However the front of the plant is "no good" to her with its flowers still in tact and growing. It takes about half a bushel of dried sage to make a 10-inch wreath," she explained. "It's important to keep cutting."

Maryland's dry weather made this a particularly rough year for anyone growing plants. "Because of the drought, I lost a whole row of Baby's Breath," said Fangmeyer. She said she uses grass clippings for mulch. "A lot of things don't do well the first year," she explained. "But when they come out the next year, they usually do a lot better."

The basement of the Fangmeyers' home houses Old Friends Antiques Shop, and one of Belle's workbenches. Herbs in various stages are hanging, drying or mixing fragrances.

To make potpourri, she outlined four steps. "When the buds of roses are drying on the bush, pick them and dry them." Belle dries the petals spread out over an ordinary window screen. Then, "put the petals and other things (fillers) in a crock. Put Orris root with the petals. After about five days add oil." The resulting concoction is one that intoxicates the senses.

Belle sees potential in just about everything. She plans to use the peelings from her peach crop for simmerings "that make your house smell like you've been baking all day." And when her lovely daughter, Dana, receives long-stemmed roses from an admirer, Belle eyes the dried up remains with anxious anticipation of a new batch of potpourri.

Some rose buds find their way into a dried arrangement. Belle said she dries flowers in either Borax or a commercial drying agent.

The Fangmeyers enjoy herbs in lamb dishes and as decorations for their beautiful country home. Belle said she looks forward to decorating another natural Christmas tree this year. "Last year we tried to put everything on it that we had on our farm." The "farm tree" was decorated with bunches of bearded barley, wooden farm animals, bunches of dried flowers and herbs.

For Belle Fangmeyer, herbs are a way of sharing with friends. She said almost everyone who visits with them, now uses mint teas. "The best part of having anything is being able to share it," she said. And what about herbs warding off evil spirits? Belle said a spirit does wander about their historic home. "But that's another story," she said with a smile.

The Fangmeyers' Living Faith Farm is located at 817 Fridinger Mill Road, Westminster, Md. 21157. Hours are Thursday, Friday and Saturday are 10 a.m. until 5 p.m., and Sunday, from noon until 5. The shop is closed during January, February and March.

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Belle Fangmeyer dries some of the herbs she cultivates in this smokehouse. She said she must keep the door open to prevent drying to the point where the herbs crumble.



Pictured above is one of the nine fireplaces in their historic home. Above the fireplace is a dried arrangement she fashioned with everlasting flowers from her 18th century garden.

Homestead Notes