ALABAMA COOPERATIVE Extension SYSTEM
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ANR-1037

ALABAMA A&M AND AUBURN UNIVERSITIES

Horticulture Notes

Growing Herbs in Containers

There are several excellent reasons to grow herbs in containers. Some herbs, such as mints, oregano, comfrey, and horsetail, can be invasive in the garden and are easier to control in pots. In some areas of Alabama, chalky soils with extremely high pH levels make herbs difficult, if not impossible, to grow. Pots can also be placed in convenient locations close to the kitchen and can easily be sheltered in winter. Container grown herbs are quite beautiful and make attractive accent pieces in gardens, in entrance ways, and on porches and balconies.

Containers

Containers may be made of clay, wood, plastic, metal, or other materials. They should be large enough to support fully grown herbs, have plenty of holes in the bottom for adequate drainage, and never have held products that would be toxic to people or plants.

Remember that drainage can be hindered when the container is set on a solid, flat surface. Raising the container an inch off the surface will help maintain drainage.

Planting Medium

A good planting medium for containers should provide rapid drainage yet have sufficient water retention to keep the root zone uniformly moist. Soilless potting mixes work best and can be purchased from garden centers. A coarse-textured medium will drain better and is easier to water than a fine-textured medium. Occasionally, these mixes are so light that containers and plants are blown over by strong winds. Place a shallow layer of gravel or pieces of broken clay pots at the bottom of the container to increase the weight.

Sunlight Requirements

Most herbs require full sun (at least 6 hours of direct sunlight per day) and will not thrive with less. Supplemental light may be required indoors. Even a southern-facing window receives less sun than most full-sun gardens. If patios and balconies are shaded for a large part of the day, herbs may not thrive. The beauty of container-grown herbs is they can be grown in an area that receives sunlight and may be moved temporarily for convenience or freeze protection.

Watering

How often you water your containers depends on the herbs planted, the pot, and the weather. Pots can dry out very quickly in the heat of summer and will probably need to be watered everyday.

During cooler spring and fall weather, you may not need to water as often.

Fertilizer

All container plants need to be fertilized. Constant watering leaches nutrients from the soil. Soluble fertilizers are convenient and should be used according to the instructions on the label. Slow-release fertilizers are formulated for constant "feeding" based on soil temperatures over a period of months. Because container-grown herbs can become hotter and require more watering than garden-grown herbs, fertilizers may be used more frequently than indicated. If under fertilized, annual herbs stop growing, set seeds, and lose their leaves.

Growing Life

Annual herbs and those commonly treated as annuals will look attractive in containers for only 1 year (dill, parsley, basil, cilantro, etc). Others, such as rosemary and thyme, can thrive in containers for several years. You can bring your herbs into the house in the fall. They may not survive until spring or thrive at low indoor light levels, but continue to harvest leaves to make full use of your herb plant. Then compost the roots and stems, and make plans for next year's containers.

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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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