

Growing Herbs

ANR-1164

Whether you pronounce it *'erbs* or *herbs*, this group of plants has historically been one of the most popular to grow and continues to experience a surge in popularity in the home garden and landscape. Why not? Herbs are among the easiest plants to grow!

Throughout time, many cultures have grown herbs primarily for their culinary and medicinal uses. Today, herbs are often classified according to their use as either culinary, medicinal, aromatic, ornamental, or household/industrial. In addition to the utilitarian uses, herbs make interesting and beautiful landscape plants, whether they are used formally in an herb garden or informally mixed into gardens with vegetables or added to a mixed border of annuals, perennials, shrubs, and trees. Herb flowers and foliage provide a beautiful palette of color and variation in texture and form. Herbs add an element of excitement to landscaping that no other group of plants do—they evoke the senses of taste, smell, and touch.

As a group of plants, herbs can be difficult to define. From a botanical definition, an herb is herbaceous—that is, it does not form woody tissue. Most gardeners, however, take a broader view of plants grown as herbs and include plants that have roots, stems, leaves, flowers, or fruits valued for their culinary, medicinal, aromatic, household, or ornamental uses. This definition encompasses plants that have woody stems, such as cultivated varieties (cultivars) of rosemary, thyme, and lavender, as well as some shrubs, trees, and vines. Thousands of herb plants are available on the market today, some of which have many cultivars.



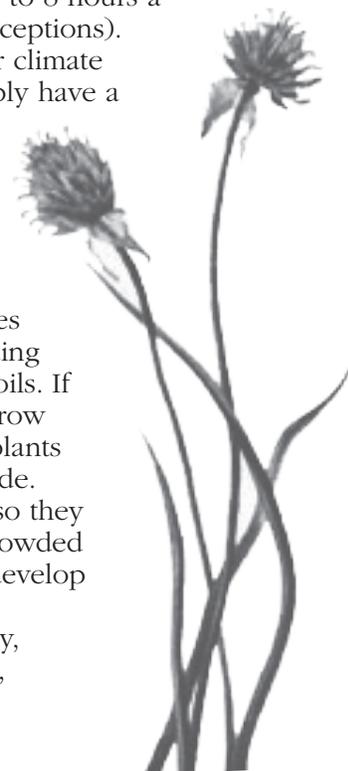
Yarrow
*Achillea
millefolium*

Basic Herb Culture *Determining Where to Plant Herbs*

Herbs are among the easiest plants to grow when given the appropriate environment. Gardeners should choose a planting site where herbs will thrive rather than just survive. Herbs are adaptable to a wide range of soil and growing conditions; however, many do not grow well in poorly drained soil and will quickly die in a wet site.

Herbs vary in their native origin, from the Mediterranean region to Europe and Asia; therefore, consider the plant's native habitat when determining a planting site. Most annual and perennial herbs grow best in full sun, generally 6 to 8 hours a day (see Table 2 for exceptions). Herbs preferring a cooler climate than Alabama's may simply have a shorter growing season here than in other areas. Some examples are cilantro, dill, anise, and other members of the Umbelliferae family.

There are some special challenges to growing herbs in Alabama, including the heat, humidity, and heavy clay soils. If you want to grow herbs that don't grow well in our long, hot days, provide plants with partial or filtered afternoon shade. Space herb plants far enough apart so they get good air circulation and light. Crowded plants do not dry quickly and may develop disease problems. Plants particularly susceptible are gray plants with fuzzy, pubescent leaves, such as lamb's ear, artemisia, sages, and others.



Common Chives
Allium Schoenoprasum

Because herbs must have well-drained soil to survive, Alabama's heavy clay soils should be amended with compost, peat, or other organic amendments to improve drainage and air space for root growth. Raised beds and containers are excellent environments for drainage. Regions of the state with sandy soils grow herbs easily.

Preparing the Soil

Herbs are tolerant of many soil types but grow best in a neutral (6 to 7 pH), loamy soil amended with organic matter. Perform a soil test to determine soil pH and nutritional needs. Soil testing information and supplies are available from your county Extension office.

Incorporate organic matter and any needed lime as you break up the soil. Adding peat moss or any type of composted organic matter will increase soil aeration and aid drainage. After thoroughly incorporating organic material, rake the soil to remove rocks, weeds, or plant debris.

Planting Herbs

Direct Seeding

Some herbs benefit from being directly seeded into prepared garden soil. Members of the Umbelliferae family (dill, cilantro/coriander, chervil, parsley, fennel, and anise) readily reseed themselves each year. Most perennial herbs, if direct-seeded, grow slowly at first. In Alabama, perennials grow best when planted in the garden as transplants during the fall. This allows the plants to establish roots before putting on new vegetative growth the next year.

When direct-seeding, sow seeds in garden furrows late March to early April or after the chance of frost has passed. Cover the seeds lightly with a shallow sprinkling of soil, or, as a rule of thumb, cover them no deeper than twice the seed diameter. Firmly tamp the soil for good seed-to-soil contact, and water using a fine mist or spray to avoid washing the seeds away. As the seedlings germinate and develop their true seed leaves, thin the plants to approximately 1 to 2 inches to avoid spindly plants that crowd one another.

Transplanting

You may want to start seeds that are expensive or have a long germination period in a greenhouse or a controlled environment indoors. Plant the seeds in mid- to late winter. Start the herbs in small containers such as peat pots, jiffy peat pellets, cell packs, or other containers designed for growing transplants. You can also use Styrofoam or cardboard cups or containers, but be sure to punch holes in the bottoms for drainage.

Start by selecting a sterile, soilless growing medium of peat mixed with perlite or vermiculite. Make sure it is well drained to reduce the chances of seedling disease problems yet able to hold needed moisture. Make sure the seeds and seedlings get adequate light, either artificial or window light (but not full sun), and a controlled temperature between 60 and 70 degrees F. Label the plants with their name and the planting date. Water the containers, and allow them to drain completely.

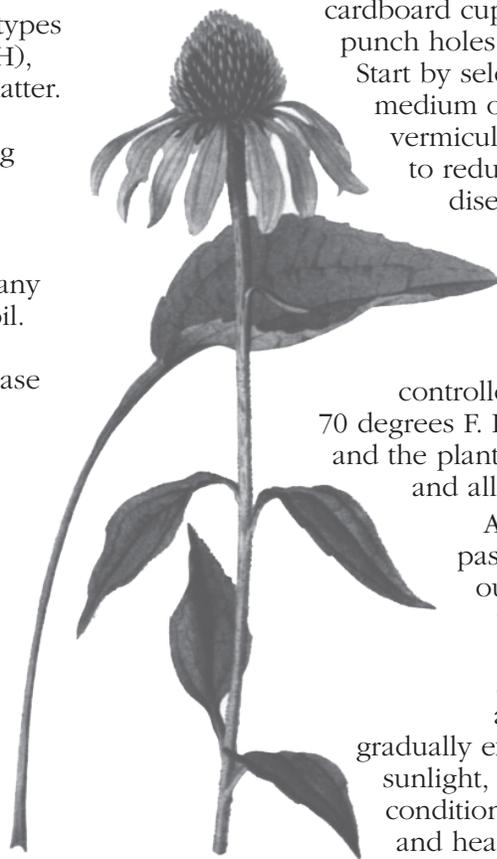
After the chance of frost has passed but before setting the plants out, harden off the young transplants by reducing the amounts of water and fertilizer. Move the transplants outside to a shaded area, and each day, gradually expose them to a little more sunlight, wind, and normal outdoor conditions. When the plants seem strong and healthy enough, transplant them to prepared beds or a garden. Tamp the soil and water the plants, making sure the plants are not deeper than in their original containers.

Other Methods of Propagating Herbs

If plant parts are obtained during the right season, they will respond well to and can be produced faster through vegetative propagation. These methods include dividing, taking stem and root cuttings, and layering.

Dividing

Herbs that are easily divided include chives, oregano, yarrow, mints, and other plants that spread by clumps or stolons (runners). During the winter months, when the plants begin dormancy, use a trowel or knife to pull apart or separate the plants into clumps. Before using this method of propagation, however, remember that some herbs that spread by stolons can be invasive if they are not grown in a contained area.



Purple Coneflower
Echinacea purpurea

Taking Stem Cuttings

Some herbs can be propagated from stem cuttings at several times during the year (Table 1). In the spring, take softwood cuttings by pruning back new shoot growth after it hardens slightly, and in the summer, take them after flowering when the new flush of summer growth has strengthened. For softwood cuttings, use a sharp knife or pruning shears, and take 2- to 4-inch cuttings, removing a few leaves from the bottom third of the stem. Take 4- to 6-inch semihardwood cuttings in the fall, and take 6- to 12-inch hardwood cuttings during the dormant season or in midwinter.

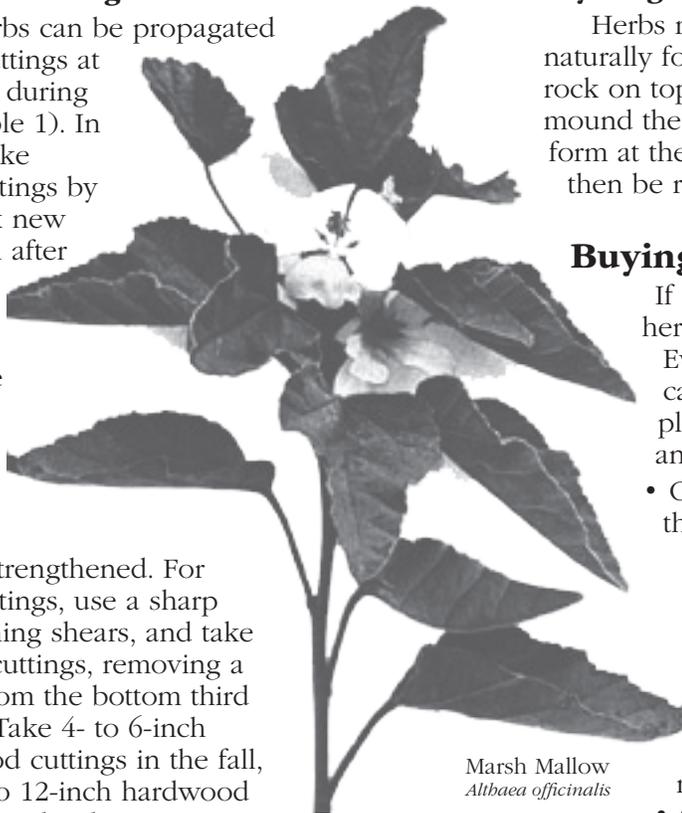
Place cuttings in a propagation bed under mist or in a container that can be covered and treated like a greenhouse environment. Use a soilless peat and perlite or vermiculite medium that contains a wetting agent or is well moistened. Dip the ends of the stems into a rooting powder. Insert about one-third of this bottom end into the potting medium. Firm the medium gently to ensure contact. Make sure the cuttings are shaded and misted each day to avoid wilting until roots form.

Table 1. Herbs That Can Be Propagated from Stem Cuttings

Rosemary	Myrtle	Oregano
Salvia varieties	Lemon verbena	Wormwood
Curry	Scented geraniums	Santolina
Thyme varieties	Marjoram	French tarragon

Taking Root Cuttings

Though this method is used less often, some herbs can be propagated from root cuttings. Cut two or three root sections of a horseradish or comfrey plant, and plant them into potting medium. That's all you need!



Marsh Mallow
Althaea officinalis

Layering

Herbs respond well to layering, which occurs naturally for some plants. To layer plants, place a rock on top of a branch, or dig a trench and mound the soil over part of a branch. Roots will form at the nodes having soil contact. This part can then be removed from the parent plant.

Buying Herb Plants

If you don't want to propagate your own herb plants, you can, of course, buy them.

Even the most inexperienced gardener can learn how to select healthy herb plants. Follow these tips when selecting an herb plant.

- Choose a good, sturdy plant that is not in the seedling stage but is well developed for the size container in which it is growing.
 - Take the plant out of its container and inspect its roots. They should be white and should fill the container but not be a solid mass, or root bound. Root bound plants have a difficult time recovering from this stunted period.
 - Check the leaves for any insects or disease problems.

Remember, the best plant is not always the largest one.

Caring for and Maintaining Herbs

Fertilizing

Herbs require minimal fertilization. In fact, herbs often suffer from overwatering and overfertilizing rather than from not enough. If your soil test recommends that a complete fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, be broadcast at planting, that may be enough nitrogen for the entire season.

Slow-release fertilizers can be used to help herbs establish. Some gardeners prefer to use organic fertilizers. Organic fertilizers generally break down slower and have other benefits that help improve the soil environment.



Wormwood
Artemisia

Watering

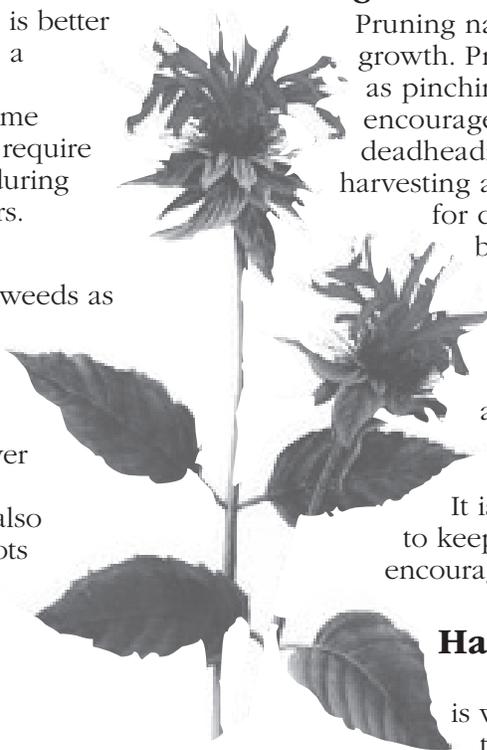
Water herbs during dry periods. It is better to irrigate to maintain soil moisture to a depth of 6 to 8 inches than to lightly sprinkle the soil surface every day. Some herbs wilt faster than others and may require more frequent watering, particularly during hot weather and if grown in containers.

Controlling Weeds

Try to remove as many perennial weeds as possible before planting a garden. Weeds compete for nutrients and water and in some cases can harbor harmful diseases and insects. Cover newly prepared garden soil with a layer of mulch to prevent weed seeds from germinating in the sunlight. Mulches also conserve soil moisture, keep plant roots cool during summer and protect plants during winter. A layer of organic mulch, such as pine straw or leaves, will be attractive as well as functional.

Pruning

Pruning naturally stimulates plant growth. Pruning herbs can be as simple as pinching back growing tips to encourage branching; removing, or deadheading, spent flowers; or harvesting a major portion of plant growth for drying and preserving. Pinching back herbs throughout the growing season is the best way to maintain healthy, vigorous, attractive plants. Prune branches just above a leaf node or above another branch where you want to force new growth to occur. It is important to deadhead herbs to keep plants growing and to encourage more flowering.



Beebalm
Monarda didyma

Harvesting Herbs

The best time to harvest herbs is when you are ready to use them. Using clipped sprigs from plants throughout the growing season is the easiest way to maintain

Table 2. Selected Herbs for Alabama

Common Name <i>Scientific Name</i>	Family	Plant Type	Height	Spacing	Form
Aloe <i>Aloe spp.</i>	Liliaceae	tender perennial	up to 2'	container	rosette
Basil <i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	Labiatae	tender annual	2' to 3'	2' to 3'	small bush, erect branching
Bay <i>Laurus nobilis</i>	Lauraceae	tender perennial	up to 10'	6' or more	tree
Beebalm <i>Monarda didyma</i>	Labiatae	perennial	3' to 4'	3' to 4'	bush, spreading (can be invasive)
Calendula (pot marigold) <i>Calendula officinalis</i>	Compositae	hardy annual	18"	1' to 2'	stem with basal rosette
Catnip <i>Nepeta cataria</i>	Labiatae	perennial	1' to 3'	3' to 4'	spreading
Cayenne Pepper <i>Capsicum annum</i>	Solanaceae	tropical	up to 2'	container	bush
Chamomile Roman chamomile <i>Chamaemelum nobilis</i>	Asteraceae	perennial	2" to 6" flowers on 1' stems	6" to 12"	mat
German chamomile <i>Matricaria recutita</i>		hardy annual	up to 2'	1' to 2'	weedy
Chives Common chives <i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	Liliaceae	perennial	1' to 2'	1'	grasslike clump

herbs, so harvest only as much as you need each time. If harvesting large amounts, follow these guidelines.

- Keep in mind an herb's growth habit to determine when and how much of the plant to prune back. With some annuals, the entire plant is often harvested to the ground at the end of the growing season. Examples of such annuals include dill, coriander (for seeds), cilantro (for leaves), and basil. Biennial herbs, including parsley, angelica, and caraway, produce leaves during the first year and flowers and seeds the second year. Perennials can have as much as half of their foliage pruned back at one time except during extreme heat or drought when the plant is under stress.
- Use caution when pruning woody perennials, such as rosemary. Never prune to bare wood. Woody herbs such as rosemary, bay, and artemisia are either very slow to regrow or may die from harsh pruning.
- Do not prune herbs drastically in the fall when the plants are preparing for dormancy. Pruning during the fall can stimulate plant growth, resulting in damage from freezing weather.

- Harvest herbs in the morning hours after the dew has dried but before the heat of the sun wilts the plant. Volatile plant oils are at their peak in the cooler, morning hours.

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Table 2. Selected Herbs for Alabama (cont.)

Light Req.	Bloom Time	Foliage Color	Flower Color	Uses	Maintenance	Notes
full sun to light shade	midsummer	green	yellow to orange to red	medicinal	Cut out dead or yellowed leaves.	Grow in a container.
full sun	July and August	varies	white	culinary, aesthetic	Cut off flower stalks for better foliage.	Many cultivars are available.
full sun to part shade	spring	dark green	insignificant	culinary	Remove leaves from food before eating.	May reach 15' to 30' in South.
full sun to part shade	July to August	dark green	pink, red, white	ornamental, culinary	Divide as necessary.	Flowers are edible.
full sun	fall to spring	green	pale yellow to deep orange	ornamental, culinary	Deadhead for better flowering.	
full sun to part shade	July to September	gray to green	white with lavender	cat toys, medicinal		Cats may damage foliage.
requires full sun	summer	bright green	white with red, orange, or green fruits	culinary, ornamental	Keep well watered and well drained.	Edible fruits range from mild to hot.
full sun to part shade	summer	bright green	yellow and white, daisylike	ornamental, medicinal	Weed well.	Take care not to overfertilize.
full sun	June	green	purple	culinary		Flowers are edible.

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Common Name <i>Scientific Name</i>	Family	Plant Type	Height	Spacing	Form
Garlic chives <i>Allium tuberosum</i>	Lilacea	perennial	2' to 3'	1'	grasslike clump
Coneflower <i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Asteraceae	perennial	2' to 4'	1' to 1.5'	stem with basal rosette
Cilantro/Coriander <i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	Umbelliferae	hardy annual	1.5' to 2.5'	seed, thin to 4"	erect with lacy foliage
Costmary <i>Tanacetum balsamita</i> (formerly <i>Chrysanthemum balsamita</i>)	Compositae	perennial	2' to 3.5'	1' to 2'	leggy, upright with staking
Dill <i>Anethum graveolens</i>	Umbelliferae	annual	3' to 5' or less	seed, thin to 6 to 18"	erect with lacy foliage
Fennel <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	Umbelliferae	perennial or annual	3' to 5'	2' to 3'	upright with feathery foliage
Florence Fennel <i>Foeniculum dulce</i>		annual	12"	seed, thin to 6-8"	bulbous stem, feathery foliage
Foxglove <i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Scrophulariaceae	biennial	3' to 4'	seed indoors, transplant to 1'	upright stem with staking, basal rosette
Germander <i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	Labiatae	evergreen perennial	1'	2'	bushy and clump forming
Hyssop <i>Hyssopus officinalis</i>	Labiatae	evergreen perennial	2' to 3'	1.5'	upright and shrubby
Lavender	Labiatae	evergreen perennial			
English lavender <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>			2' to 2.5'	3'	shrubby
Spanish lavender <i>Lavandula stoechas</i>			1' to 2'	3'	shrubby
Lavender Cotton	Compositae	evergreen perennial	1' to 2'	2' to 4'	shrubby
Grey lavender cotton <i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i>					
Green lavender cotton <i>Santolina virens</i>					
Lemon Balm <i>Melissa officinalis</i>	Labiatae	perennial	2' to 3'	3' to 4'	bushy, spreading

Table 2. Selected Herbs for Alabama (cont.)

Light Req.	Bloom Time	Foliage Color	Flower Color	Uses	Maintenance	Notes
full sun	June	green	white	culinary	Can be invasive.	
full sun	midsummer to frost	dark green	purple to pink	ornamental, medicinal	Deadhead old flowers for better blooming.	'Bright Star' is a good choice; white cultivars are available.
sun to part shade	spring or mid to late summer	bright green	white or mauve	culinary	Weeding and mulching are necessary.	This plant self-seeds; young leaves are cilantro; seeds are coriander.
sun to part shade	late summer	bright green	daisylike, white rays	culinary	Prune to prevent flowering.	Divide rhizome to propagate.
full sun	spring to early summer	blueish-green	yellow umbels	culinary	Prune flowers for better foliage.	Sow in early spring and fall.
full sun	June to August	green, bronze or purple	compound yellow umbels	culinary	"Bulb" may be harvested for salads, etc.	This is the preferred host of swallowtail butterflies.
part shade	spring to late summer	deep green	purple with spots of white and purple	ornamental	This plant needs lots of water to bloom best	Toxic! This is the source of digitalis heart medicine.
full sun to light shade	summer	bright green	pink and purple	ornamental	Keep moist; avoid hedge pruning.	'Variegatum' has ivory variegation.
light shade	June to August	green	blue spikes	ornamental, medicinal	Prune, deadhead for best blooms.	This is a good bee and butterfly plant.
full sun	June to September	grayish green	purple	ornamental, medicinal	Watch for rot if plant remains too wet.	This plant is highly prized for its essential oil.
					Prune hard in July for rebloom.	This is the best species for Southern hardiness
full sun	June and July	gray green	bright yellow	ornamental	Plant in light, dry soil.	Harvest before flowering for best aroma.
full sun to shade	July to September	green to coppery	white or yellow	culinary, ornamental	Divide every 3 to 4 years.	Use this for its lemony taste.

Table 2. Selected Herbs for Alabama

Common Name <i>Scientific Name</i>	Family	Plant Type	Height	Spacing	Form
Lemon Verbena <i>Aloysia triphylla</i>	Verbenaceae	tropical perennial	up to 6'	3' to 4'	shrubby and leggy
Marjoram <i>Origanum majorana</i>	Labiatae	tender perennial	up to 3'	4'	rounded, spreading
Marsh Mallow <i>Althaea officinalis</i>	Malvaceae	perennial	4' to 5'	3'-4'	erect with spreading branches
Mint <i>Mentha</i> spp.	Labiatae	perennial	1' to 2'	2'	low, bushy, spreading
Nasturtium <i>Tropaeolum majus</i>	Tropaeolaceae	annual	1' to 2.5' (or 6' vine)	seed to 6" to 9"	bushy to viney
Greek Oregano <i>Origanum heracleoticum</i>	Labiatae	perennial	1' to 2'	2'	bushy, spreading
Parsley <i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	Umbelliferae	biennial	1' to 1.5'	1'	rosette
Rosemary <i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	Labiatae	evergreen perennial	4' to 6'	3' to 4'	upright and shrubby
Rue <i>Ruta graveolens</i>	Rutaceae	evergreen perennial	1' to 3'	18"	bushy
Sage	Labiatae	perennial			
Garden sage <i>Salvia officinalis</i>			1' to 3'	2'	bushy
Mealy cup sage <i>Salvia farinacea</i>			up to 4'	2' to 3'	stemy
Mexican bush sage <i>Salvia leucantha</i>			4' to 5'	3'	bushy
Pineapple sage <i>Salvia elegans</i>			3' to 4'	3' to 4'	bushy
Russian sage <i>Perovskia atriplicifolia</i>			3' to 4'	2' to 3'	bushy

Table 2. Selected Herbs for Alabama (cont.)

Light Req.	Bloom Time	Foliage Color	Flower Color	Uses	Maintenance	Notes
full sun	late summer to fall	lime green	white	ornamental, culinary	Overwinter this herb in a container inside.	This herb is susceptible to spider mites and whiteflies.
full sun	August to September	dark grayish green	tiny, pink or white	culinary, ornamental	Pinch back before flowering to keep shape.	This herb keeps well dried.
shade	July to September	grayish green	pink or white	ornamental	Divide as needed in the spring.	Moist soil is a must!
full sun to part shade	July and August	bright green	purple, pink, or white	culinary, ornamental, medicinal	Grow this herb in a container to control root growth.	Mints are very invasive and will take over if allowed.
full sun to part shade	February to June	dark grayish green	red, orange, or yellow	ornamental, culinary	Sun is necessary for plant to bloom.	Flowers and leaves are edible, beautiful in salads.
full sun	July to September	green	white	culinary	Prune in order to maintain shape.	Variegated and ornamental varieties.
full sun	May to September	dark green	greenish yellow	culinary	Prune old, outside leaves or harvest these first.	Replace every year to avoid bolting.
full sun	early summer	dark green	lilac to blue	culinary, medicinal	Prune to desired shape. Try a hedge or topiary.	This herb will not transplant well.
full sun	June to August	bluish gray	yellow	ornamental	Keep soil well drained.	Rue causes contact dermatitis in some people.
full sun to part shade	June	cultivar dependent	white to purple	culinary	Keep soil dry.	'Berggarten' is a good choice.
	June to September	grayish green	light blue	ornamental	Prune to keep good shape.	
	August to September	dark green	purple	ornamental	Prune in June so stalks can hold flowers upright.	Butterflies and hummingbirds love this plant!
	August to October	green	red	culinary, ornamental		
	June to August	silvery green	lilac	ornamental		This is a gorgeous plant worth growing!

Table 2. Selected Herbs for Alabama

Common Name <i>Scientific Name</i>	Family	Plant Type	Height	Spacing	Form
Texas Tarragon or Sweet-Scented Marigold <i>Tagetes lucida</i>	Asteraceae	perennial	3' to 4'	2' to 3'	erect and bushy
Thyme	Labiatae	evergreen perennial			
Common thyme <i>Thymus vulgaris</i>			1'	1'	upright and shrubby
Creeping thyme or mother-of-thyme <i>Thymus praecox</i>			2" to 3"	6" to 8"	mat
Lemon thyme <i>Thymus x citriodorus</i>			4" to 12"	1'	upright and shrubby
Woolly thyme <i>Thymus pseudolanuginosus</i>			2"	6" to 10"	mat
Wormwood <i>Artemisia</i> spp.	Compositae	perennial	3' to 4'	2' to 3'	bushy
Yarrow <i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Asteraceae	perennial	6" to 10"	3' to 4'	spreading rosette

Table 2. Selected Herbs for Alabama (cont.)

Light Req.	Bloom Time	Foliage Color	Flower Color	Uses	Maintenance	Notes
full sun	fall (into frost)	bright green	yellow	culinary	Prune if desired.	Foliage has a terrific anise flavor.
full sun	June to July	green dark green golden edged grayish green	rose purple lilac pink	culinary	Divide or replace when center dies. Frequent pruning will extend plant life.	Silver foliage may rot if overwatered. “Woolly” refers to the herb’s fuzzy leaves.
full sun	July to August	silvery green	greenish yellow	ornamental	Silver varieties will rot if too wet.	A. x ‘Powis Castle’ and x ‘Silver King’ are great choices.
full sun	June to September	grayish green	white, pink, yellow	ornamental, medicinal	Divide after 3 to 5 years.	Many cultivars are available.



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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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