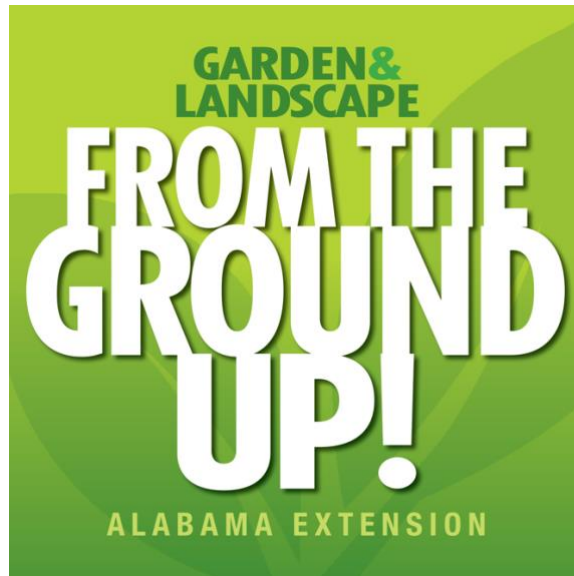




Season 3 Episode 2—Growing Herbs

June 9, 2026

Narrator

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds team educating you about home landscapes gardens and home pests.

Brian Brown

As we come into the summer season some of you may have questions about herbs. And so, joining me today is Megan Jones. She is housed in the Henry County office of Extension. And we're going to talk about herbs today, so welcome!

Megan Jones

Thank you Dr. Brian Brown, my name is Megan Jones like you said. And I am housed... I'm actually housed in Henry County, but I'm at the Wiregrass Research and Extension Center. But Henry County and Abbeville is one of the offices that I serve, as well as Houston County, Dale County, Bullock County, Barbour County. So, so Barbour, Bullock, Henry, Houston, and Dale, so those five counties.

And I'm down here in the Wiregrass, and I just get a lot of questions about just like, what can you grow that's pretty easy? So, herbs are one of my first things that I like to recommend, because you can use it for a lot of different things: for cooking; for cut flower gardens; you can use it in your landscape as just like an ornamental plant as well. So, there's a lot of different things that you can do with herbs.

Brian Brown

So, what got you into herbs?

Megan Jones

So, I just I like to cook and so and of course I like to garden because I'm a horticulturist. And so, I wanted to figure out a way to bring those plants that are pretty easy to grow, if you're like a starter gardener, a beginner gardener. And, and yeah, so that's, that's pretty much what got me started is, is, you know, trying to get people interested and more confident in something that they can grow either inside or outside, and they feel pretty confident in growing. So then that way, it sparks more interest into the future for them to keep growing other things that are a little bit harder to grow.

Brian Brown

I think a lot of people have that mentality that they go into gardening and they want to start with tomatoes. And in a previous podcast, we had one of the guests say that, you know, tomatoes are going to hurt your feelings.

Megan Jones

They will.

Brian Brown

And I think that's very profound, that 'let's start with something easy as a first-time gardener, and herbs, I guess, is a good gateway for them to come into this.

Megan Jones

I think so. It's, you know, they're mostly pretty forgivable. You can, you know, plant them and they grow a few leaves, especially like things like cilantro or basil, dill. And then you can plant some more a couple of weeks later. And then just keep succession planting and you'll just keep getting that, you know, some herb plants. And if you're growing them outside, you can keep them growing throughout the season, depending on if they're a warm season or a cool season herb.

So, they are definitely very forgiving. Unlike something like a tomato that needs a lot of tender love and care throughout the whole season.

Brian Brown

Yeah, right.

Megan Jones

For that, it's just, you know, I always like to think of like, tomatoes, we love them, but they are here...they tend to kind of want to die whenever we plant them. So, we have to prevent it. It's just not, it's not if, it's when. So anyways.

Brian Brown

Right. So, what's your top, you know, three or four herbs that you really like to grow?

Megan Jones

I like to really recommend basil. That's probably one of the easier ones, just the regular sweet basil. I like the dark purple as well, but it's not as forgiving and the germination rate isn't always as well as good as the sweet basil. But those are really fun. And again, you can use those in cut flower gardens if you let them go to flower and they smell great, and you can only use a few pinches of the leaves, and they'll keep growing and growing. And you don't need a lot for recipes.

And then I also like dill. Same reason I like to like to plant dill and fennel because it's great for, you know, cooking and things like that. But it also is really great for cut flower gardens and it's a great for pollinator gardens. It helps, you know, be a host plant for a lot of different butterflies and caterpillars and things like that.

And then, yeah, dill, fennel and...dill, fennel, basil... I love cilantro because that's, you know, one thing that that you can grow in the wintertime as well as, you know parsley - parsley is a really good one too for the cool season.

Brian Brown

So, what's the best time? You mentioned cool season... What's the best time to start your herb garden?

Megan Jones

So down here in south Alabama if you're doing a cool season, I would suggest doing that in the fall. So usually around September or October you know, start, start sowing those seeds. Probably October is probably best. And then for the spring I would do it, you know, once soil temps are above like, you know, 65-70 degrees consistently. And you know, that's, that's probably whenever I would do it.

Brian Brown

So, you have your three or four or five that you want to start with. What should you start with? Should you start with a seed, or should you buy a transplant?

Megan Jones

So that's a good question. So, it depends on what you're wanting to plant. So, like rosemary, oregano, rosemary, oregano and thyme could definitely be propagated via like, you know, doing a transplant. Rosemary and thyme are considered more woody type herbaceous herbs. But I would pretty much do everything else by seed because again, they're very forgiving. You don't have to...

It's much cheaper that way. You can buy a pack of seeds and then, you know, comparatively speaking, to one herb, especially if you're doing succession planting. So, so, it just depends on what you're going to grow. But most everything can be propagated via seed.

Brian Brown

Are there herbs that thrive in South Alabama? You know you're in the Wiregrass area. Definitely soil differences. But also, you know, in the summer we're all going to get hot. But is there any difference between south Alabama, things you can grow down there versus things in north Alabama, where I'm located, that we can't really grow?

Megan Jones

In terms of herbs, I feel like, you know, the soil types definitely vary, but most of us are growing a lot of herbs in containers or raised beds. So, you know, without considering soil types. And we're all, you know, planting in a container mix of some kind. Then I would say when it comes to heat, it's going to really depend on when you can direct seed herbs up in north Alabama and south Alabama, I think will be like 2 or 3 weeks, you know, ahead of you in direct, you know, planting.

And then you'll probably need to plant a little earlier, you know, for your cool season herbs before you get the harder freezes. You know, I think in July and August everything is going to start kind of, you know, slowing the that leafy growth, and they start to bolt, which means that they're going to flower instead of promoting the leafy growth, which is what we want with herbs.

You know, that's mostly what we cook with is the, the leafy growth. So, so, yeah, everything starts to kind of slow down in July and August. I think there's, you know, just a little bit of variation throughout Alabama but not enough to really matter.

Brian Brown

So, what about soil types? You know, up here in North Alabama we're mostly clay. Very few sandy areas. There's some loamy areas over in east Alabama, northeast Alabama. But down in the south y'all have a lot of sand, right?

Megan Jones

Yes.

Brian Brown

And you know where I'm at where I'm at in Walker County, we have a lot of clay and not only clay but a lot of rocks as well. So how do we deal with that? Is this really affect what herbs you can grow?

Megan Jones

So yes. So, we are very close to the gulf. So, we have a lot of sandier type soils, but we also have clay soils as well. And so, it definitely can affect what you can direct seed into the ground. And that's why I like to recommend using some type of container or raised bed when it comes to something that's more of an annual type herbaceous herb instead of like, again, a woody ornamental like rosemary or thyme.

Echinacea can, can grow, because it's considered a perennial, well in different soil types and not in a raised bed. But I would do something like that more in a mix that drains well. Herbs mostly have like a background of a Mediterranean style, so they prefer a drier soil type. So, they like well-draining soil, but they also like organic matter too.

Brian Brown

So, what if you were going to do like a raised bed full of herbs? What type of mix would you use? Or would you use a lot of perlite or something that would create a lot of airspace?

Megan Jones

Yes, I would do something that had a lot of perlite, maybe even like 50%, you know, like a compost soilless mix with 50% perlite that way it drains very well. You know, and people a lot of times mistake that everything needs to be fed well, you know, fertilize well. And while the compost will have a lot of nutrients, most of the compost will have enough to kind of sustain short lived annuals.

But if you need to fertilize doing something like a fish emulsion—if it's outside of course. I wouldn't put fish emulsion in the kitchen garden. Yeah, the people probably wouldn't like the smell of that. But some of them, you know, outside the fish emulsion would be a really good fertilizer that I would recommend. It's very safe. It won't burn your herbs and it's got enough nutrient levels in there that it won't-- it'll help promote your, the flavor of your herbs without, you know, hurting the herbs itself.

Brian Brown

What are some pests and diseases that you see most people having problems with?

Megan Jones

So, there aren't a whole lot of diseases that herbs will get BUT they will, you know, a lot of them are, well, I'll say a lot of them, a few of them are considered host plants. So, you know, you will get some caterpillars eating your plants. And if you plant them too close together, a lot of things will get like downy mildew or, you know, some leaf spot.

If you're not watering at the soil level, you can get a bacterial or fungal disease. So, you know, a soil-borne disease if you're, you're splashing the water on there. But most of the time if you plant them with the recommended width and then not too close and, you know, pretty much full sun, then you shouldn't be having a lot of issues with diseases and pests.

Brian Brown

So, if you're going to do like a raised bed or something, you would recommend drip irrigation, right?

Megan Jones

Yes, I recommend drip irrigation with everything pretty much. You know, if, if we could do lawn care with drip irrigation, we would do it, right? Especially with that St. Augustine [grass]. But, but yes, I like to say low and slow at the, at the soil level, if you are, you know, hand watering or watering with a water hose.

But if you're just doing a system, definitely do drip irrigation that'll spray right there at the soil level at your plant.

They also don't need a whole lot of water either. They do need to be watered well during the hot summer months whenever it gets really warm. You know, right now we have some, some drought concerns. But again, they, they like to have some well-draining soil. They don't like to be sopping wet all the time, so definitely keep that in mind whenever you're watering. And I like to water first thing in the morning really early.

Brian Brown

I think herbs are one of the things that really will show you that they need a drink pretty quickly, you know, they're especially the thin leaves, like-

Megan Jones

-like a basil. Yes, they'll wilt.

Brian Brown

That's one of the first indicators. They'll just droop immediately and they're like, "okay, it's time to water." So, I like I like drip irrigation. I do a lot of things with drip irrigation. So, air flow and, and drip irrigation can't be discounted for sure.

Megan Jones

That's right. Yeah. Pretty much with anything that we grow.

Brian Brown

Yeah. Absolutely. So, what's your favorite herb?

Megan Jones

You know, I love cilantro. That's a I know that's a...

Brian Brown

Oh that's- yeah that could be controversial. Some people have that aversion, or I guess it tastes like soap to some people?

Megan Jones

Yes, a lot of people. I think my daughter...it's funny because they say it's genetic. So, my daughter does not like cilantro at all. But I love cilantro. And I like to put it in tacos and in recipes and, you know, in salsa. And so yes, my favorite is probably cilantro.

And then I also love dill. Of course, if you like a dill pickle, then you love some dill. And that one's really easy to grow. And again, I love it because it grows so well here. And I love cut flower gardens, so I like to use it in that as well as for pollinator promotion for, for host plants.

Brian Brown

Yeah. My dad, in particular, he really likes to make pickled okra and so he'll stuff a lot of dill in that, and everybody loves it. I'm not a huge fan of it. But you know, that's you can mix it in with other things if you want to pickle it.

Megan Jones

So yeah. And, again, it's super easy to grow to me. So, I mean I feel like other people could definitely grow it as long as they do these, these simple steps.

Brian Brown

So, what are some underutilized herbs that you think us cooks can—I say us cooks, 'cause I like to cook, too—so, what what's something we should be using out there?

Megan Jones

So, herbs really help add flavor without, you know, it adds some macronutrients, but it also adds flavor when, you know, especially for people who can't use a lot of salt or sodium or certain things. So, using that is very important. People can use the coriander seeds. People don't always realize that coriander is actually cilantro after it bolts so that the, the seeds that come out of the cilantro flowers are coriander.

And then I'm not the biggest fan of the fennel seeds. They kind of...they taste very strong. But again, if you need a strong flavor and you can't use salt and pepper or, you know, certain sodium enriched seasonings, then using something like that would be really good. Thyme and rosemary are great for meat dishes. So that's great for turkey and steak and things like that.

And it really adds flavor to pretty much anything. If you're roasting vegetables, you can add some of those to that. Just like a, you know, a 6 inches full of leaves and you just stick it on there and it adds just so much flavor as it cooks.

Brian Brown

So, can you talk a little bit about preserving herbs? Because we if we grow them all season, most of the time herbs are going to produce a whole lot more. They're almost like squash. You're going to have a whole bunch of it. So, how can we preserve what we grow and use it throughout the year, or what's the best way to do that?

Megan Jones

Right. So, for me, I've partnered a lot with our food preservation agents. And so, we like to recommend drying them. So after, you know, it's been growing for a while-- before they bolt, of course-- I would cut, for example, a cilantro or parsley or the dill and I would cut a whole stalk of it and make sure it has some leaves on it and it's not bolted yet, so that way it's not-it has the best flavor. And you tie up a bundle of it, and you put it in a brown paper sack, and you put it in a cool, dry place, hang it up, you know, upside down. And that way it'll dry out completely. And then you can remove all those leaves from the stem and preserve it in a jar.

And then if it's if you don't want to wait that long though, you can also use a dehydrator as well. You know, it depends on how long you want to do what you've planted and how long you dehydrate it. But that would probably be a question for them. But that's kind of what I do. And, and a lot of times I will just plant it again like, you know, succession planting and then I don't really use anything else after that season's over.

But, but you can definitely save it and dehydrate it. And a lot of times the flavor is enhanced after you have dehydrated it and it's been saved. So that's really cool to know too.

Brian Brown

So, I've seen people use ice trays where they put maybe some oil or like olive oil or something, and they put the herbs in there with that. Do you know how to do that?

Megan Jones

You know, I have had that question before, especially with like, like chives. Yeah. You know, you can use the, the chives, the flowers for an oil or a vinaigrette. I'm not sure of exactly how to do that. I think you have to do something about like, like cooking it or that way it's not just essentially rotting within the oil.

But I think with certain vinaigrettes you can do it fresh. But again, I'm not sure of the recipe itself, but I'm sure there are some definitely some resources online on how to do that. So.

Brian Brown

So, what are some resources online through Alabama Extension that we can offer people that want to start their own garden?

Megan Jones

So, we actually have a few push cards online. I know we have a sage and the dill push cards with "Grow More, Give More" and we have just recommendations on when to plant, how to plant, sun requirements, what are requirements for those certain things. So, you would just go on the ACES.edu website and look up sage Grow More, Give More or sage or, I'm sorry, dill Grow More, Give More. And then, you know, we have a few of those different things that are on the SOW app as well. So, if you use the SOW app you can you can see when you can direct seed certain herbs. And then we also have a publication on drying herbs.

Brian Brown

And as always if you have questions feel free to reach out to your Extension agent. Every county has a local Extension agent. They may not be in your county, but they may be covering your area. So go to aces.edu, you can find your home horticulture agent and call them with any questions you have. Megan, thank you for joining me today, and hopefully everybody will start planting some herbs this summer and enjoy them for the rest of the year.

Megan Jones

Absolutely. Thanks, Brian. And also, I just want to say National Herbs and Spices Days is on June 10th annually every year. So, I like to tell everyone to go plant some herbs now, and that way you can enjoy them in June during the National Herbs and Spices Day. So yeah. So, thanks Brian. I hope to be on here again soon.

Brian Brown

From the Ground Up is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.