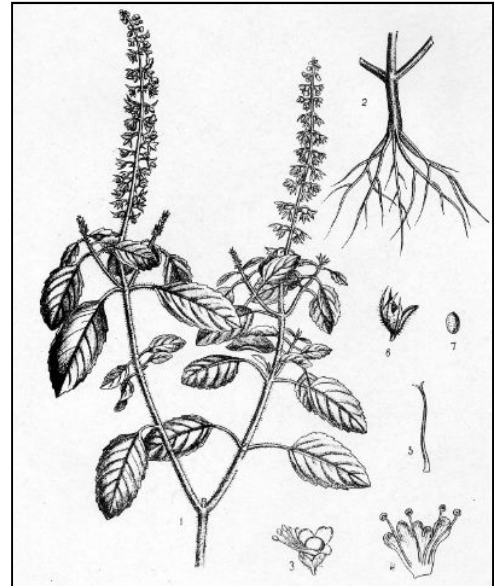


Quick reference guide for planting herbs in Wisconsin

by Robin Mittenthal, January 2009

Important notes about this guide:

- 1) This guide is a small section of a book-length manual for beginning gardeners called From the Ground Up. The manual includes more information about how to grow the crops discussed here, as well as general explanations of fertilizer, compost, weed management, and other related topics. It is available for free online at the following address: http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/tips/garden_manual_v_1.1.pdf
- 2) Dates provided are appropriate for an average season in southern Wisconsin and other areas in zone 4 of the United States Department of Agriculture's Zone Map. In zone 4, average last frost date in the spring ranges from May 1 to May 30 and average first frost date in the fall ranges from September 1 to September 30. If you are located outside this zone, you should try to find locally appropriate dates (look online or talk to a horticulture extension staff person at the nearest state university), but you can also try to adjust by allowing six days difference for every 160 km (100 mi) of latitude you are away from Madison, Wisconsin. North, plant later; south, plant earlier.
- 3) Note that planting dates in many cases refer to transplants and *not* seeds. Transplants must be started substantially earlier, either indoors or in a small greenhouse called a cold frame. You can also buy transplants of most of these herbs at local garden stores and farmers' markets.
- 4) Some of the herbs listed here (rosemary, for example) are perennials that can live for many years, but only in warmer climates. Here, you can either grow them as annuals (planting them in the spring or early summer and letting them die in the fall, as I do), or (in some cases) bring them inside each winter and replant them each spring or summer.



Basil plant with flowers. From *Indian Medicinal Plants* by B.D. Basu, 1918

Annual Herbs		
Annual Herb (or Perennial Herb Grown as an Annual)	How to plant it	Possibly useful information about the plant
Basil	Basil has absolutely no frost tolerance. It will also not grow in cold soils. You can start it yourself inside in late April or early May, buy transplants at a garden store in late May or early June, or wait until June to plant seeds directly in the garden. If you grow or buy transplants, put them in the garden after frost, spacing the plants 30 cm (12 in) apart in rows 30 cm (12 in) apart. If you plant seeds yourself, plant them about 5 cm (2 in) apart, very shallowly (3 mm/ 1/8 in), in rows 30 cm (12 in) apart. Germination is best if you use a floating row cover to create extra heat in the soil. Once the seedlings have 4 or more leaves, thin them so they are 30 cm (12 in) apart.	Basil is a mint and also a perennial, but it has no cold tolerance at all and never survives northern winters outside. There are many kinds of mint with leaves of different colors, sizes, and flavors. Basil leaves contain too much moisture for effective air drying. Freeze them or dry them in an oven if desired. The plant is most often used fresh. Basil plants grow slowly when they are small, but very quickly once they get bigger (as long as the weather is warm). Harvest them regularly, removing whole sections of the plant (up to 50% if the plant has gotten very large) to encourage new growth of stems and leaves. At some point, the plants will begin to produce flowering stalks and flowers. Pinch these off as soon as they appear to make the plant grow more leaves. For some growers, one planting of basil is enough. For real basil lovers, however, planting basil two or even three times during the summer is a good idea, since the plants do slow down their growth and flower eventually, no matter how much you try to stop them.

Annual Herbs (Continued)

Annual Herb (or Perennial Herb Grown as an Annual)	How to plant it	Possibly useful information about the plant
Chamomile	You may be able to buy transplants, which should be planted about 15 cm (6 in) apart after the danger of frost has passed. You can also grow chamomile from seed – after frost has passed, scatter seeds on the surface of the soil (do not bury them at all), keep the soil moist, and then thin the plants to 15 cm (6 in) once they have four or more leaves.	Chamomile is an annual, but it germinates easily in the garden, and if you let it go to seed, it will often reseed itself the next year. As a result, it can sometimes become an annoying weed in your garden. The leaves have some fragrance, but it's usually the flowers that are harvested and dried for use in tea and other forms.
Cilantro (also called culantro or coriander)	You can sometimes buy cilantro transplants, but the plant really does not transplant well. Instead, plant seeds 1 cm (½ in) deep as soon as all danger of frost has passed. Plant the seeds 5 cm (2 in) apart if you are growing the plant for its leaves, but 12 cm (5 in) apart if you are growing it for its seeds. Weed thoroughly and mulch around the plants if you can – cilantro does not compete well with weeds. Plant one or more times in the spring and the fall, and skip the hottest part of the summer.	Cilantro and coriander are the same plant, though the name cilantro is often used for the leaves of the plant and coriander for the seeds (the leaves and seeds have surprisingly different flavors). Unfortunately, cilantro tends to grow very fast and flower quickly (at which point it stops growing new leaves). It grows less quickly in the spring and fall than in the summer, and you can also lengthen its productive time by harvesting the plants heavily at regular intervals (cut off all of the leaves and stems about 5 cm/2 in above the ground and they will grow back within 1-2 weeks). If you want the seeds, let the plants flower and set seed. Cut off whole plants as soon as the plants turn brown and before the seed pods open. Hang the plants upside-down to dry out of direct sunlight, open the seed pods, and store the seeds in a jar or freezer bag. You can dry cilantro leaves, but they lose a lot of their flavor in drying.
Dill	You can sometimes buy dill transplants, but the plant really does not transplant well. Instead, plant seeds 6 mm (¼ in) deep as soon as danger of frost has passed. Plant the seeds 5 cm (2 in) apart if you are growing the plant for its leaves, but 12 cm (5 in) apart if you are growing it for its seeds.	Both the leaves and seeds of dill are used as flavorings. To keep plants producing leaves, cut off flowering stalks as soon as they appear. If you want the seeds, do not harvest leaves -- let the plants flower and set seed. Cut off whole plants as soon as the plants turn brown and before the seed pods open. Hang the plants upside-down to dry out of direct sunlight, open the seed pods, and store the seeds in a jar or freezer bag.
Fennel	You can sometimes buy fennel transplants, but the plant is easy to grow from seed. Plant seeds 3 mm (1/8 in) deep as soon as danger of frost has passed, and make sure to keep the seedbed moist until the plants are up. Plant the seeds 10-15 cm (4-6 in) apart if you are growing the plant for its leaves, but 30 cm (12 in) apart if you are growing it for its bulbs or seeds.	If protected with mulch, fennel can be a long-lived perennial. Most growers treat it as an annual, however. Fennel is a versatile plant in which the leaves, seeds, and (in some varieties) roots are all eaten. For leaves and seeds, treat the plants much as you would treat dill (above). For bulbs, make sure that you get a bulbing variety (often called "Florence" fennel) and plant in a bed with a lot of fertilizer. The bulbs grow slowly, but you can plant fennel as late as July or even August and get at least small bulbs. Once the bulbs are the size of a small egg, hill dirt up around the bulb to keep it growing and protect it from rodents. Remove any flowers the plants start to produce. The bulbs will keep in the ground through the winter if mulched, but can be harvested any time around or after the first frost in the fall. Chop them up for use in soups and stews.
Marjoram	Can be grown outside from seed, but is usually planted as a transplant after frost. Grow your own plants inside (plant seeds 3 mm/ 1/8 in deep 6 weeks before last frost). Otherwise wait until after frost and buy plants that are about 8 cm (3 in) tall at a garden store or farmers' market. Plant them 15-20 cm (6-8 in) apart.	Marjoram is a perennial, but is not cold-tolerant and is usually grown as an annual. To harvest marjoram, wait until the plants start to flower, then cut them off about 8 cm (3 in) above the soil. Wait for them to regrow and then repeat until the plants are killed by frost.
Parsley	Parsley can be difficult to start yourself, and most gardeners just wait until after frost to buy a few small plants at a garden store or farmers' market. Put the plants about 20 cm (8 in) apart in each direction.	Parsley is actually a "biennial," meaning that if you protect it with heavy mulch, it will live through the winter and grow for a second year before flowering. However, it is usually grown as an annual. Once plants are established, they grow quickly and can be harvested often; pick the largest, longest leaves around the edge of the plant, removing 20-40% of the leaves each time you harvest. Parsley is very cold tolerant and can be harvested through several early frosts, after which you should either pull them out mulch them.

Annual Herbs (Continued)

Annual Herb (or Perennial Herb Grown as an Annual)	How to plant it	Possibly useful information about the plant
Rosemary	Rosemary can be difficult to start yourself, and most gardeners wait until after frost to buy one or a few small plants (8 cm (3 in) tall is big enough) at a garden store or farmers' market. Put the plants about 60 cm (24 in) apart in each direction. This may seem too far apart, but the plants will grow very large if they are healthy, and the spacing helps promote the good air circulation rosemary needs.	Let your rosemary plants get about 20 cm (8 in) tall before you begin to harvest them. Harvest by removing small sections of stems together with their leaves. Do not remove more than 20% of the plant at any time. Rosemary is a perennial, but it is not cold-tolerant. Because rosemary grows slowly and is expensive to buy, people often try to bring their rosemary plants inside. Unfortunately, the plants need cool (15 C/60 F), humid conditions that are hard to match indoors in winter. To overwinter it, dig it from the garden in October and put it in a pot of very light ("soilless") potting mix. Water it and leave it outside in the pot for two weeks. Then, bring it inside and put it in a south-facing window away from any heat source. Spray the leaves with water every few days and water it just enough to keep the soil slightly moist. It will probably not grow much, and you shouldn't harvest it during the winter unless it does.

Perennial Herbs

Perennial Herb	How to plant it	Possibly useful information about the plant
Chives	Chives can be difficult to start yourself, and most gardeners wait until after frost to buy a few plants at a garden store or farmers' market (or talk to a gardener you know and ask them to divide some of their existing large plants). Put the plants in 15 cm (6 in) apart.	Chives are a long-lived, cold-tolerant perennial related to onions and garlic. The plants grow into clumps that get quite large and should be dug up and divided every three years or so. To harvest chives, wait until the leaves are at least 15 cm (6 in) long, and then cut them off with a knife, leaving a minimum of 5 cm (2 in) of leaf above ground. They will regrow and can be cut several times during the season. At some point in the late summer, you should let them grow without cutting them all down, though if the plant(s) are well established, you can continue to harvest some leaves using the same technique. The plants may flower, and you can either remove the flowers when they are new and cook with them (they have a strong, pleasant chive flavor) or let them open and enjoy looking at them.
Lavender	Lavender can be difficult to start yourself, and most gardeners wait until after frost to buy one or a few plants at a garden store or farmers' market (or talk to a gardener you know and ask them to give you some; they can either physically divide some of their existing large plants, or cut off some shoots and let them grow roots in a jar of water on your windowsill). How far apart you put the plants will determine how big they get – if you want to grow a hedge of them, you can plant them less than 30 cm (12 in) apart. If you want only one or two large, healthy plants, plant them at least 60 cm (24 in) apart.	Lavender is a very long-lived, woody perennial that can grow into small bushes. It takes a plant about three years to reach its full size, but you can harvest it each year while it grows. Lavender is best known for its use in perfumes and flower arrangements, but it is also used in cooking along with (or in place of) other strong-flavored herbs like rosemary to add a sweet flavor. Both the flowers and the leaves are used. If you want the flowers for one reason or another, cut the flowering stalks before the topmost flowers have opened, and let them stand in an empty jar in a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight. Dry the leaves as you would other herbs.
Lovage	Lovage can be started indoors from seed before frost, but most gardeners buy transplants – given enough space, one or two plants will provide all the lovage you need. Plant lovage plants 60 cm (24 in) apart after danger of frost has passed.	Lovage is a close relative of celery, and its leaves and stems taste much like celery. Lovage is a tough, long-lived perennial.

Perennial Herbs (Continued)

Annual Herb (or Perennial Herbs Grown as an Annual)	How to plant it	Possibly useful information about the plant
Mint	Different mints have different needs. Lemon balm, a popular mint, can be grown from seed (plant in the spring, around frost, or in the late fall, just barely covering the seed with soil), but is more often grown by dividing an existing large plant. Put plants 30-60 cm (12-24 in) apart in each direction, though in most gardens, one plant will be enough. Peppermint, spearmint, and many other mints are grown the same way. You may want to keep your mints in pots to keep them from spreading too much.	There is no one plant called “mint” – mints are actually a large family of hundreds of different plants. All mints have square stems and similarly shaped leaves (though there are some plants with square stems that are not mints), but the flavors and odors of the plants vary tremendously (and some have to obvious smell or taste at all). Some are well known on their own (basil, lemon balm, pineapple mint, peppermint, catnip), while other equally interesting ones are less common. Some mints are cold-tolerant perennials, and some of them (like lemon balm) are fairly aggressive plants that will take over your garden unless you periodically remove some of their growth by digging it out. Most mints can be eaten fresh or dried. Harvest often to keep plants smaller. Most of them dry well, though some kinds lose most of their fragrance in drying.
Oregano	Oregano can be grown from seed, but most gardeners either buy plants or get them from another gardener who is dividing large plants. After danger of frost has passed, plant plants 20-25 cm (8-10 in) apart in each direction. During the year you plant them, remove any flowers that form to encourage more plant growth.	Oregano plants can live a long time and grow into small bushes. Over time they may get woody and produce fewer leaves, so some growers replace them after 3-5 years (others just prune them back). If you let the plants flower and drop seeds after their first year, some of the seeds may grow into new, young plants. Oregano dries very well.
Sage	Sage seeds do not store well and can be tricky to start – most growers buy sage transplants or dig up a piece of someone else’s large, established plant. Plant plants 60 cm (24 in) apart after danger of frost has passed (though in most gardens, one plant will be enough).	Sage is a long-lived perennial that can grow into quite large woody bushes. If you plant a small plant, do not harvest it the first year. After that, harvest it often and prune it back if it starts to get too big. Sage is nice when used fresh but it also dries well.
Tarragon	Tarragon is difficult to grow from seed, and most growers either purchase plants or find other gardeners with established plants that can be divided. Plant in a sunny place after all danger of frost has passed. Put plants 45 cm (18 in) apart.	Look for French tarragon rather than Russian tarragon. Tarragon is a somewhat delicate plant that will not always survive the winter outside. You can bring it indoors and treat it like rosemary (see above), but you can also mulch the roots heavily in the fall and hope that the plants survive (they often do!). Once you have plants established, prune off most of the small outer branches each spring in March or April so that the plants stay compact. Used either fresh or dried.
Thyme	Thyme is difficult to start from seed, and most growers but plants. Plant plants about 20 cm (8 in) apart after danger of frost has passed.	Thyme is a tough, long-lived perennial. There are many varieties of thyme, each of looks and smells somewhat different from the others. English thyme is one of the most flavorful and popular, but others are also good. Thyme can grow into large, dense mats, and you may want to dig it up after 3-5 years and replant one or two small pieces of it.



Rosemary