

Herbs for cooks

From spearmint to French tarragon, herb expert Jekka McVicar lists the essential culinary herbs that no gardener cook should be without

WORDS JEKKA McVICAR PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Herbs quite simply transform a meal into a feast – they not only make the food look and taste appealing, they also stimulate the digestion and are one of the essential ingredients that make a meal come alive. Furthermore, they look beautiful in the garden or in containers and, as many of the culinary herbs are from the *Lamiaceae* family, including thyme, rosemary, sage, oregano, mint and basil, they are very attractive to bees and butterflies.

Of all the herbs I grow, the one I believe is most synonymous with summer is basil (including Greek and Thai basil, described on page 88). It conjures up thoughts of the Mediterranean, sitting outside on a warm evening and sharing a meal with the family, be it pizza, where the basil can be added to the dough (a recipe follows on page 90), a salad, or a panna cotta, where the custard is flavoured with basil, or simply to make a refreshing tisane (a herbal tea). In Greece, basil is a sign of welcome and you find pots placed at the entrance to the home or on the table where it is not only a great fly repellent but also a mosquito repellent – rubbing crushed leaves on to the skin will help you avoid being bitten. My top tip for growing this herb successfully in the UK, where our summers can be unpredictable and prone to cold spells at night, is to water your containers in the morning before you go to work, never at night, as this will stop the plants sulking and ‘damping off’.

Another herb from the Mediterranean that is only just becoming known and is incredibly useful in the kitchen, is savory. There are varying forms of this herb but, for our UK climate, the one that is the most robust is winter savory (*Satureja montana*). The leaves have a fiery, peppery flavour eaten straight from the bush and, when cooked, this

flavour infuses into the food, cutting down on the amount of salt required for extra seasoning and aiding digestion, especially if the dish is predominantly beans or pulses.

If asked which herb I could not survive without it would be mint, such as spearmint ‘Tashkent’ (*Mentha spicata* ‘Tashkent’, described on page 88), for not only does it look great in flower in any border where it can be covered in butterflies and bees, it has many diverse uses in the kitchen. For example, the leaves can be used in both sweet and savoury dishes, it makes cold or hot tisanes, it is amazing in cocktails such as mojitos and, similar to basil, it deters mosquitoes when the crushed leaves are rubbed on to the skin.

Herbs are essential for our everyday wellbeing as they not only provide flavour and additional nutritional benefits to food, but also maintain a healthy ecosystem in the garden and keep our livestock healthy and productive. Even if you only have space for a few pots, herbs are guaranteed to lift your spirits and transform your meals. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Open The farm holds open days for the public. Check the calendar on the website.

Chelsea 2016 Don’t miss Jekka’s herb-filled, healing show garden in aid of St John’s Hospice, at this year’s RHS Chelsea Flower Show. See page 50 for details.

• Turn for 12 of Jekka’s recommended herbs



Jekka gathers marigolds to use the petals in her cooking. Her herb garden is a riot of colour during summer when plants, such as the blue-flowered hyssop are in full bloom.

12 essential herbs

1 *Mentha spicata* 'Tashkent' (spearmint)

A hardy, herbaceous perennial with mauve flowers and textured, scented leaves. Good with potatoes, salads and in mint sauce. Grown from root or tip cuttings only. 80cm.

2 *Salvia officinalis* (common sage)

Frost-hardy, evergreen perennial with purple, edible flowers and aromatic leaves. Good flavour. Can be grown from seed. 45cm.

3 *Ocimum basilicum* 'Horapha' (Thai basil)

A frost-tender annual that has small, pale mulberry flowers and aniseed scented leaves. Only grown from seed. 30cm.

4 *Ocimum minimum* (Greek basil)

Frost-tender annual with white flowers. Small, aromatic leaves. Use in salads and cheese dishes. Only grown from seed. 23cm.

5 *Borago officinalis* 'Alba' (borage)

Frost-hardy annual with white flowers that can be used in drinks and salads. Young leaves are great in salads or chilled soup. Only grown from seed. 45cm.

6 *Diplotaxis muralis* (wild rocket)

Fully hardy, herbaceous perennial with yellow flowers in summer. Leaves are delicious in salads. Can be grown from seed. 75cm.

7 *Allium schoenoprasum* (chives)

Fully hardy, herbaceous perennial. Mild onion flavour. Add to salads, egg and cheese dishes. Can be grown from seed. 30cm.

8 *Artemisia dracunculus* (French tarragon)

Frost-hardy, herbaceous perennial. Aromatic leaves have an aniseed flavour. Grown from root or tip cuttings only. 90cm.

9 *Satureja montana* (winter savory)

Fully hardy, perennial, semi-evergreen. Has small, white flowers. Good for salt-free diets. Can be grown from seed. 30cm.

10 *Calendula officinalis* (pot marigold)

Frost-hardy annual with orange flowers. Petals are lovely in salads, pastry and butters. Only grown from seed. 45cm.

11 *Cichorium intybus* (chicory)

Fully hardy, herbaceous perennial with blue flowers (good for drinks) and slightly bitter leaves. Use young leaves and flowers in salads. Can be grown from seed. 1m.

12 *Hyssopus officinalis* (hyssop)

Fully hardy perennial with dark-blue flowers. Aromatic leaves have a bitter, minty flavour. Good with fatty fish and meat. Can be grown from seed. 80cm.

• Turn for Jekka's herb-inspired recipes





Pizza with Greek basil

SERVES 2

- 175g plain flour plus extra for rolling out
- 1tsp salt
- 1tsp easy blend dried yeast
- ½tsp golden caster sugar
- 1tbsp olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
- 2tbsp Greek basil leaves removed from the stem
- 225g fresh tomatoes skinned and chopped, or 1 x 400g tin of chopped tomatoes
- 1 small onion peeled and finely chopped
- 150g mozzarella cut into thin slices

Preheat the oven to 220°C. Sift the flour, salt, yeast and sugar into a bowl and make a well in the centre, then add the olive oil and pour in 120ml of hand-hot water. Mix into a ball of dough and transfer to a work surface, kneading for approx 3-5 minutes until elastic. Put the dough in a large bowl and cover with lightly oiled cling film. Leave somewhere warm for the dough to prove (about 45-60 minutes).

Make the topping while the dough rises. Heat the oil in a small saucepan and cook the onion until clear. Add the chopped tomatoes, season to taste and leave to simmer uncovered until there is very little liquid left.

When the dough is ready, lightly dust a work surface with flour and half the basil leaves and knead it until all the leaves are in the dough. Make a ball and use a rolling pin to roll the dough into a circle approx 25cm diameter and stretch it out with your hands. Lay on a pizza stone or tin, or a baking tray lined with non-stick paper. Spread on the sauce, scatter the mozzarella and the remaining basil leaves on top and drizzle lightly with oil. Bake for 10-12 minutes until the crust is golden brown.



Roast chicken with French tarragon and lemon

SERVES 4-6

- 1.35kg organic or free-range chicken
- 2 good handfuls of French tarragon
- 4 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
- Light olive oil
- 10g softened unsalted butter
- 1 lemon, sliced
- Black pepper and salt

Preheat the oven to 175°C. Rub the chicken with olive oil. Mix the unsalted butter with the chopped garlic. Put the garlic butter, plus a few sprigs of tarragon in the cavity along with a couple of slices of lemon. Rub a roasting tin with olive oil, then line the base of the tin with the tarragon (no need to strip from the stem) and the remaining slices of lemon. Put the chicken on to a bed of the remaining tarragon.

Transfer the chicken to the preheated oven and roast for approximately one and a half hours until fully cooked (use an oven thermometer to check it's between 160°C and 165°C). During the cooking time, baste the chicken every now and then. Once cooked, remove the chicken to a serving board, cover with tin foil and let it rest before carving. Strain the juices into a small jug to be poured over the meal. Serve the chicken with new potatoes and a green salad.

French tarragon is the reason I became a herb farmer. Over 30 years ago, a friend of mine came to my home in Bristol to ask for some tarragon, as she was having a go at an Elizabeth David recipe. I realised you couldn't buy fresh tarragon anywhere in those days so I decided to start growing it to sell myself.



Gnocchi with sage butter

SERVES 4

- 275g King Edward potatoes, washed with skins on
- 95g plain flour plus extra for rolling
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- Black pepper and salt
- 8 fresh torn sage leaves plus a couple for dressing
- 50g unsalted butter
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped or crushed
- Grated parmesan

Simmer the potatoes in a large saucepan of water for 20 minutes. Drain, remove the skin (use a tea towel to hold the hot potatoes) and place into a bowl. Mash the potatoes with an electric hand blender until smooth and set aside to cool. Once cool, add the flour, half the beaten egg and seasoning. Combine the ingredients and when a ball forms, knead lightly in the bowl. Add more egg if too dry.

Transfer the mixture to a floured surface, divide into quarters and roll each into sausage shapes 1cm in diameter, then cut into 2.5cm pieces, rolling into dumplings. Put on a tray, cover with cling film and chill in the fridge for at least half an hour. They will keep for a day.

When chilled, press the back of a fork into the top of the dumplings to make ridges. Bring a large, shallow pan of water to the boil, turn down to a simmer and put a serving bowl in a warm oven. Drop the gnocchi into the water, cook for approx 3 minutes and remove to the warm dish using a draining spoon. Gently melt the butter with the garlic in a small pan. When the garlic browns, add the torn sage leaves and allow the butter to froth while the leaves crisp. Spoon the butter over the gnocchi, sprinkle on parmesan and serve.

Beetroot and carrot salad with chives and a mint dressing

SERVES 4

For salad:

- 1 red beetroot, washed and grated
- 1 golden beetroot (if none available use another red), washed and grated
- 1 carrot, washed and grated
- Salad leaves, including young beetroot leaves
- Wild rocket leaves
- Chives
- White borage flowers

For dressing:

- 1 good handful of chopped spearmint leaves
- 1tbsp balsamic vinegar

- 3tbsp olive oil
- Black pepper and salt

Put all the grated ingredients into a bowl and mix well. Take another bowl and gently mix the washed salad and rocket leaves. Place the mixed grated carrot and beetroot on to the leaves and distribute the chive leaves over the top along with the white borage flowers. Make the salad dressing by putting the balsamic vinegar and the olive

oil into a bowl with a good handful of spearmint leaves and, using a hand blender, whizz them together. If you do not have a hand blender, chop the spearmint leaves finely and add them to the vinegar and oil mixture. Add seasoning to taste. Combine with the salad just before serving. Having grown up in a home where my mother had a very productive vegetable garden, grated fresh beetroot salad was something we often had in the summer.

