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## **Understanding Herbs**

An herb is more than just a plant that is nice to look at. It is a plant that is useful in some way to people. Throughout history, herbs have been used to flavor foods, to take as medicine, and to use for decorative purposes.

The Bible speaks of the Jews eating bitter herbs (probably parsley and coriander) during the Passover celebration. We also hear about a group of men called Pharisees who brought offerings (or gifts) to the Lord. Among these gifts were herbs.

The Romans took baths in water perfumed by lavender and also spread mint leaves on their floors to mask household odors and repel pests.

In medieval times, because sanitation was almost non-existent and fresh air was thought to be harmful, fragrant herbs were oftentimes held to the nose to stifle odors. These herbs became known as nose-gays. Herbs with medicinal fragrances were used to supposedly combat germs and to fight the plague.

Later, the English began the custom of sending tussie-mussies to convey a special message to friends, acquaintances, and loved ones. Tussie-mussies were tightly gathered bouquets of herbs and flowers, each herb or flower in the bouquet expressing a personal message. Marjoram combined with forget-me-nots symbolized the joy and happiness of true love. Rosemary mixed in with a bouquet of zinnias represented remembrance of absent friends. Basil was used to express love and good wishes. This romantic, indirect, and elaborate custom reached its peak during the Victorian Era.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, church and monastery gardens became the model for rural gardeners. Church leaders divided their garden space with walkways laid out in the shape of the cross.

Today we have expanded on the versatility and usefulness of herbs. We enjoy them in cooking and in crafting, in gardening and in garnishing. They're wonderful in jams and jellies, in potpourris and poultices, in tinctures and in teas.

Dried herbs are beautiful in bouquets and wreaths. They are a great complement to other dried flowers in arrangements, and they make pretty and fragrant potpourris.

The most aromatic leaves for potpourri are those from the mint family, as well as rosemary, sage, thyme, sweet woodruff, lemon balm, and basil. For colorful potpourri, add borage flowers, lavender flowers, and rosemary flowers (blue) or chamomile flowers (yellow).

In cooking and baking, the sky's the limit. Herbs are the perfect answer to peppering up tired cooking and adding a healthful flavor to food. From lemon and basil chicken with rosemary biscuits to scented geranium cake and lavender ice cream, your new slant on cooking and entertaining is sure to draw rave reviews!

To learn about an herb's flavor and intensity, smell and then take a small bite. Here are a few herbs, along with a general idea of what you might expect if you're sniffing or tasting: chervil -mild licorice; chives -mild onion; lemon verbena -clean, sweet lemon; mint- refreshing; oregano- spicy, robust; parsley- mild, fresh taste; sage- pungent; savory- warm, peppery; and thyme -spicy, cloverlike.

Have you ever garnished with herbs? Try these traditional combinations:

- Borage flowers candied on cakes, cookies, and fruit salads.
- Scented geranium leaves on fruit slices or cottage cheese.
- Mint leaves frozen in ice cubes and added to summer drinks.
- A sprig of mint atop a dollop of whipped cream and a piece of fudge cake.

Herbal vinegar makes a wonderful gift -especially when a decorative bottle is used, finished off with a natural, raffia bow.

And herbal teas are delicious and easy to brew. Chamomile, lemon verbena, mint, and sage are just a few herbs you can use to make a delicious and beneficial cup of hot tea. Sweeten with sugar or honey, serve hot or cold, mix with different fruit juices or with a slice of pineapple or orange.

Add medicinal herbs from your garden to a bathtub filled with warm water to take a refreshing and relaxing bath. Mix the following dried leaves and flowers together: ½ cup rose petals, 1 cup lemon verbena, and 1 cup chamomile. Store in a glass jar until ready to use. Tie up in cheesecloth and let hot tap water pour through the herbs while your tub is filling. Now enjoy a nice, long soak!

Other practical uses include eating a sprig of parsley to sweeten your breath, soaking your feet in thyme tea to rid them of fungus, and planting basil near doorways to repel flies and mosquitoes.

For a refreshing treat while mowing the grass, plant different varieties of mint and let them grow into your lawn areas (scrap this idea if you want your lawn and edging to be immaculate and totally groomed, though) or plant them as groundcover. As you mow, the delightful scent of mint - spearmint, peppermint, candy mint, apple mint, chocolate mint, and more -will fill the air. Since mint grows quickly and spreads rapidly, there should be enough of it to enjoy throughout the mowing season!

This summer get close to nature and explore and enjoy the world of herbs. Herb and Rosemary are anxiously waiting to meet you, and there's no thyme like the present to get acquainted!