

Ornamental Herbs for Illinois Gardens

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NRES-VC-37-97



Horticulture Facts

When most people think of an herb garden, a sea of green is what comes to mind. Unfortunately, most herbs peak in May and June, and become unattractive once summer arrives. There is so much emphasis on the usefulness of herbs that many people don't appreciate how attractive many of them are because of their eye-catching flowers, foliage, or fragrances. They can be grown as accent plants or groundcovers, massed for effect, or grown in combination with other flowers and herbs in borders or rock gardens.

Basil, Purple (*Ocimum basilicum* 'Purpurescens')

Culture: Sow the seed in spring as soon as the ground can be worked.

Transplants are also

available at nurseries and garden centers; do not set them out until all danger of frost is past. Space plants 8 to 12 inches apart.

Uses: The purple foliage combines well with gray, gold, or yellow foliage. Best planted in thick drifts. This type of basil is not used as frequently in cooking as the green-leaf types, but the leaves can be used to perk up any vegetable, poultry, or meat dish. It can also be used in

pesto and makes a beautiful herb vinegar. The leaves can be dried but they shrink about 50 percent and turn a purplish brown.

Bee Balm, Bergamot, Oswego Tea (*Monarda didyma*)

Description: A hardy erect perennial reaching a height of 3 to 4 feet. The flowers are red, pink, white, or violet, and are easily identified by their tubular florets arranged in whorls. The leaves and flowers emit a delightful minty fragrance. The plant spreads rapidly and becomes invasive by forming mats of shallow rhizomes.

Culture: Monarda grows best in a sunny location with moist, well-drained soil. In dry soils, the plants tend to be shorter; in shade, they tend to get floppy and require staking. Space plants 12 to 15 inches apart. Remove faded flowers to prolong the flowering season. Divide every 2 to 3 years; otherwise, the center dies out while the outer part of the plant is the most vigorous. Powdery mildew is usually a serious problem in midsummer. If left uncontrolled, the plant will be defoliated. Consult your local Extension Service for control recommendations. To dry the flowers, harvest them just after they've opened. Hang them upside down in small bunches.

Uses: A favorite perennial for the garden. The plant attracts bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies. The flowers can be dried for arrangements and the dried leaves can be added to potpourri. Bee Balm was discovered by early settlers in North America where the Oswego Indians used the leaves and flowers to make a delicious soothing and relaxing tea. The dried flowers can be used in potpourris, wreaths, and arrangements.

Calendula, Pot Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*)

Description: A popular annual with a small, compact habit, growing no taller than 18 inches. The leaves are

spatula shaped; the flowers can be single or double and come in a wide range of colors from creamy yellow to dark orange. Newer varieties have longer stalks and larger, double flowers. The blossoms close at night or on dark days. The plants tends to reseed themselves.

Culture: Calendula is very easy to cultivate and does best in a rich, loamy, well-drained soil. Sow the seeds outdoors six weeks before the last frost. Space the plants 18 inches apart. The plants tend to flower best in cool weather. Remove dead flowers to ensure continuous bloom. The flowers retain their color, shape and strength when dried. The blooms dry well placed face down on a screen.

Uses: A good plant where you want sunny yellow flowers that are good for cutting. Use in mass or drifts with rue or lemon balm. The plants tend to be too floppy for a formal garden. Fresh flower petals can be sprinkled on salads; dried petals can be added to soups. The flowers dry easily for use in arrangements.

Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*)

Description: Catnip is most famous for its erotic effect on cats. It is a coarse-leaved perennial with 3-inch heart-shaped, serrated leaves that are green to gray-green above and whitish underneath. The stems are also covered with a soft white fuzz. The plant starts out as a clump and eventually reaches 3 feet tall when the dainty white-pink flowers on spikes appear in mid-to-late summer.

Culture: Catnip tolerates any soil but it should be well-drained. The plants will look best and be most fragrant if grown in full sun. It is easily started from seed or from cuttings taken in spring and inserted in a moist rooting medium. If you cut the plant back throughout the growing season, it forms a dense mat. Catnip does not dry particularly well; the leaves curl and darken while the flowers lose their color.

Uses: An easy-to-grow perennial useful as a groundcover or drifts in a border. Good complement to monarda, feverfew, or horehound. Can be used to make a sweet peppery tea. For drying, gather the leaves and tops in late summer when the plant is in full bloom and dry in a warm, dry location.

Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*)

Description: A tall, erect, highly aromatic annual reaching a height of 1 to 2 feet. When in flower, the plants are covered with hundreds of 1/2-inch yellow flowers that are conical shaped and hollow in the middle when cut. When the herb is dried, it has a sweet apple scent.

Culture: Chamomile is easily started from seed planted outdoors after all danger of frost is past. It prefers

a well-drained soil in full sun. Give the plants room to spread; when overcrowded, the attractive bushy nature is destroyed. If allowed to go to seed, the plants can self-sow.

Uses: The plants make a fragrant border plant in a flower garden. The dried flowers are used to make a mild tea and as an ingredient in cream rinses and shampoos. The flowers should be harvested just as the petals begin to turn back and the flower center begins to brown. They are a nice touch to potpourris, garlands, and wreaths.

Chives, Garlic (*Allium tuberosum*)

Description: A hardy perennial with flat, green leaves 1/2-inch wide. This is one of the few herbs that flowers late in the season. Flowers are white, star-like in umbels, and have a sweet fragrance. The plant tends to self-sow if the papery seedheads are left to mature and drop their seeds.

Culture: Prefers a site with full sun and moist, well-drained soil but is tolerant of any conditions. Remove faded flowers to prevent seed-set.

Uses: The leaves have the combined flavors of garlic and chives. Use the snipped leaves in salads, soups, or sauces. The flowers can also be used in flower arrangements or as a garnish. The green seedheads can be used to make garlic vinegar.

Geraniums, Scented (*Pelargonium species*)

Description: Tender, shrubby perennials that are grown as annuals in Illinois. They are mostly erect types, growing to 3 feet tall, but there are also some trailing types. The leaves are generally soft and hairy, releasing a distinctive fragrance when crushed or bruised. Some of the more common scented geranium species are described here.

Rose Geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*). Has hairy, deep green leaves that are divided and toothed, with a delicate, spicy rose scent. The rather unshowy flower clusters with 5 to 10 florets each are rose to purple in color. Its leaves are used in jellies, potpourris, cakes and puddings.

Lemon Geranium (*P. crispum*). Grows to a height of 3 feet; produces 3-lobed, stiff curly leaves and lilac pink flowers.

Apple Geranium (*P. odoratissima*). One of the most prolific blooming with white, fluffy flowers. The 1-1/2-foot trailing stems with silky, ruffled leaves is excellent for a hanging basket. The leaves emit a sweet apple scent when crushed.

Peppermint Geranium (*P. tomentosum*). A wide-spreading perennial that is also excellent for a hanging basket. It grows 1 to 2 feet tall and is best pinched to encourage branching. Leaves are 3 to 5 inches long, heart-

shaped, softly hairy above and woolly below, with a strong mint scent. Small white flowers with red centers appear in clusters.

Nutmeg Geranium (*P.x fragrans*). Has trailing stems with small gray leaves and white flowers. Perfect for hanging baskets.

Lime Geranium (*P.x nervosum*). Produces a bushy, round plant with light green leaves and abundant, showy lavender flower.

'Mabel Gray' (*P.cv.* 'Mabel Gray'). Rarely sets flowers but is the most intensely lemon-scented geranium.

Culture: Because geraniums that are grown from seed often don't have the same scent as the parent plant, it is best to start with cuttings rooted in damp sphagnum moss mixed with perlite or vermiculite. Plant geraniums outside after all danger of frost is past in moist, well-drained soil in full sun. Pinch the plants to encourage branching. Since scented geraniums are tender perennials, those that are grown out-of-doors in summer can be potted up in the fall and overwintered indoors as houseplants.

Uses: Useful in a border, rock garden or grown in a container. Delightful near a patio where their striking foliage can be appreciated. The trailing types are excellent for hanging baskets; the upright types can be trained into standards. These are popular because of their pungent, spicy foliage aromas that are invaluable for potpourris, preserves, desserts, punches, vinegars, teas, and sachets. The leaves lose their color and turn brown when dried, but retain their fragrance.

Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*)

Description: This is a spreading perennial that grows no more than 2 feet tall. The leaves and stems are wrinkled, grayish green, and covered with downy white hair. Horehound reseeds itself and can become a pesky weed. Small, white flowers appear along the stems in summer, but only after the plants are 2 years old.

Culture: Sow the seed 1/2 inch deep in a sunny, poor, sandy, dry soil. The plants will tolerate a moist situation. When the seedlings are 5 inches tall, thin them to 12 inches apart. Established plants can be divided in spring. The leaves dry well and remain sturdy. The flowers do not dry very well, but can be pressed.

Uses: A good bee herb for a border or rock garden. The woolly, white stems are a good accent to phlox, feverfew, or chamomile. The stems can be cut and dried for arrangements; they are best cut just as the flower buds form. The plant tends to lose its flavor quickly as it dries. For centuries horehound was used as a medicine and, more recently, in candy and as a tea.

Lamb's Ear (*Stachys byzantina*)

Description: A hardy perennial groundcover that grows 6 to 12 inches tall and spreads 24 inches. The stems and leaves are white with a feltlike or velvety texture. The purplish pink flowers are borne on 4- to 6-inch spikes in early summer. The flowers are not outstanding but some gardeners use them for dried arrangements. Several cultivars exist; one in particular, 'Silver Carpet', is a nonflowering form.

Culture: Lamb's ear requires full sun and a well-drained soil. Excess moisture, as well as high humidity, causes the leaves to rot. This plant spreads easily but is not invasive. It can be divided in early spring to keep the clumps small. To dry the leaves, spread them out on a screen and turn them every few days. The leaves will curl slightly, but are still attractive. The flower spikes can be dried by harvesting them just as they begin to bloom and hanging them upside down in small bunches.

Uses: This is one of the best perennials for a garden because of its silvery, woolly leaves. Makes an excellent edging plant, accent, or companion to other plants. The pinkish blue flower spikes combine well with other pink or blue flowered perennials.

Lavender, English (*Lavandula angustifolia*)

Description: Of all the lavenders available, this is the most aromatic and dependable. It is a somewhat woody perennial that grows from 1-1/2 to 3 feet tall. The leaves are narrow, 2 inches long, and a pleasing gray-green in color. The flowers form in June and July and are borne on long-stemmed slender spikes. Of the many varieties available, three are suggested: 'Munstead' grows 15 inches tall and has deep lavender flowers; 'Hidcote' grows 12 inches tall and has brilliant purple flowers; 'Jean Davis' grows 18 inches tall and has pink flowers.

Culture: Propagate lavender by means of cuttings or layered divisions of 3-year-old plants. Starting from seed is difficult due to the long time it takes to germinate. Lavender grows best in a dry and well-drained, sunny location and in alkaline soil. Avoid wet, poorly drained soils that could lead to disease problems. Harvest the flower spikes just as the blooms are opening and air dry them on a screen or hang in bunches. The blue/purple types dry well; the pink types tend to fade.

Uses: Lavender is grown for its flowers and attractive foliage. It makes a beautiful edging for walks or a flower border or added to a rock garden. It has a lovely subtle fragrance and the dried flowers are used in sachets and perfumes to scent closets and drawers. The flowers and leaves can also be used in vinegars and jellies.

Marjoram, Golden (*Origanum onites* 'Aureum')

Description: A low-growing, perennial herb with creeping roots and erect, wiry stems that reach a height of 12 inches. The soft leaves are oval and a bright golden color.

Culture: Plant marjoram in a dry, well-drained soil in full sun. Plants can be easily started from seed indoors; the seeds germinate in 10 days if kept moist and covered with 1/4 inch of soil. Established plants are also available at garden centers. Space mature plants 12 inches apart. New plants should be started every 3 or 4 years since the old ones become too woody and unkempt.

Uses: The leaves are not as strongly scented as regular marjoram and not as desirable for cooking. This marjoram makes a good contrast with purple-foliage plants and is useful as a low groundcover in the rock garden or along a sidewalk.

Mint, Pineapple (*Mentha suaveolens* 'Variegata')

Description: A cultivar of apple mint that grows erect to 1 foot tall. The foliage is round, wooly, and green with cream and white variegations and has a mild pineapple scent. The variegation is variable; some leaves have cream markings all around the edge, others partly, and some without any at all. The flowers are whitish gray in dense spikes in July to September.

Culture: As with most mints, will grow anywhere but tolerates drier soil conditions than most. Will grow in full sun or partial shade. Easily propagated by division of clumps. The plants send out many spreading runners that can be divided and lifted. Frequently cutting the foliage keeps the plants attractive and encourages bushier plants. Since this variety of mint is only partly hardy, it is best to mulch the plants to provide winter protection.

Uses: An attractive low-growing groundcover, particularly where you want a rampant spreader. The fresh leaves can be chopped and added to salads or fruit.

Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*)

Description: This a tender annual with round, light green leaves and showy yellow, orange, or red flowers. The stems are elongated, give the plant a spreading habit.

Culture: Because nasturtiums flower less and produce mostly leaves in a rich, moist soil, plant the seed in an unfertile location after danger of frost is past. Although the plants will grow in full sun, it is better to choose a partially shaded spot. Soak the seeds overnight in water to aid germination. The fresh leaves and flowers can be harvested anytime during the growing season.

Uses: The dwarf bushy types make colorful edging plants. The entire plant has a spicy, peppery flavor. The

leaves, flowers, and stems are commonly used fresh in salads, and the green pods can be pickled and used as a substitute for capers.

Rue (*Ruta graveolens*)

Description: The plants are shrubby, semi-evergreen, and grow to 3 feet tall. The most striking features are the blue-green foliage and the yellow flowers that appear in clusters from summer through fall. In addition to several cultivars that have excellent blue-green color, the cultivar 'Variegata' has leaves splashed with white.

Culture: This perennial can be started from seed, or you may prefer to buy plants at a garden center. Rue prefers a well-drained loamy soil in full sun, although it will tolerate poor soil in light shade. The plants may need pruning in late spring; cut them back to the new growth. The yellow flowers can be dried by cutting the stems just as they begin to open and hanging upside down in small bunches. If the flowers are left on the plant, they mature into seedpods that can be harvested just before they open.

Uses: Rue is the traditional herb of brides in Lithuania. Historically, it has been used as an antiseptic and disinfectant. Its upright habit makes it an excellent low hedge for the flower bed. The flowers can be added to potpourris or used in wreaths and arrangements.

Sage, Golden (*Salvia officinalis* 'Aurea')

Description: A compact, shrubby perennial that grows 18 inches tall. The leaves are elliptical and variegated green and gold.

Culture: Sages prefer full sun and poor, well-drained soil. They do not tolerate overly wet soils. Start with plants purchased from a garden center and set them out after all danger of frost is past. Trim the plants back in spring to encourage bushy growth. The leaves will lose some of their color when dried.

Uses: A complementary plant to purple, red, or gray foliage. This variety of sage is not used in cooking as common sage is, but can be used nonetheless. The leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season and used fresh or dried for winter.

Sage, Purple (*Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens')

Description: A compact shrubby perennial that grows 18 inches tall. The new growth is tinged reddish; the purple coloring is less distinct in older leaves. Bright blue flowers appear in early summer.

Culture: Sages prefer full sun and poor, well-drained soil. They do not tolerate overly wet soils. Start with plants purchased from a garden center and set them out after all danger of frost is past. Trim the plants back in

spring and during the growing season to encourage bushy growth. This variety of sage tends to be somewhat tender and should be given extra winter protection or overwintered indoors. The leaves can be dried, but they will lose some of their color.

Uses: This is the perfect complement to plants with pink flowers and silver foliage. This variety of sage is not commonly used in cooking as is garden sage but can be used nonetheless. The leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season and used fresh or dried for winter.

Sage, Variegated (*Salvia officinalis* 'Tricolor')

Description: Sage is a shrubby perennial of the mint family. The leaves of this variety are variegated with white, purplish red, and pink. The plants grow to a height of 2 feet.

Culture: Sages prefer full sun and poor, well-drained soil. They do not tolerate overly wet soils. Trim back the foliage in spring and during the growing season to keep the plant bushy. This variety of sage tends to be somewhat tender and should be given extra winter protection or overwintered indoors. The leaves can be dried, but they lose some of their color.

Uses: Use it as a low hedge, groundcover, or combined with plants that have pink flowers. The foliage can be used in cooking.

Thyme, Silver (*Thymus x citriodorus* 'Argenteus')

Description: Low-growing, wiry-stemmed, woody perennial that grows no more than 8 inches tall. The leaves are small, oval, and olive-green with a silver-white edge; the whole plant has a citruslike fragrance. The flowers are small, pink, and borne in clusters.

Culture: Thyme grows best in a light, well-drained soil. It can be started from seed, but it is more successful to start with established plants from a garden center. Space mature plants 12 inches apart. As the plants mature, the crown dies out, leaving the edges most actively growing; they should be cut back regularly. To dry the leaves, harvest them just before the plants bloom. Lay them on a screen to dry.

Uses: Thymes are excellent edging or rock garden plants. Silver thyme looks especially effective if grown among dark rock or near evergreens.

Woodruff, Sweet (*Galium odoratum*)

Description: Sweet woodruff is a low-growing, pleasant-smelling, perennial groundcover that reaches a height of only 8 to 10 inches. The glossy, bright green leaves grow in whorls around the stem. Clusters of white, star-shaped flowers appear at the tips of the stems in early summer and last about a month.

Culture: The seed is slow to germinate, so it is best to divide established plants in spring or fall, or take cuttings from mature plants and root them in a mixture of peat moss and perlite. Space the plants 1 foot apart. Sweet woodruff is self-sowing once established and can become a pesky weed.

Uses: This makes an attractive, low groundcover for a shady area, though it cannot handle foot traffic. This herb is mainly used to flavor punches, summer drinks, and May wine.

Its haylike aroma increases as the leaves dry. Harvest the leaves in late spring before blossoms appear; dry them upside down in a dark area.

Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*)

Description: An aromatic semi-evergreen perennial with woody, silk-haired, grooved stems that reach a height of 2 to 3 feet. The basal leaves are lobed, while the stem leaves are bipinnate; both are covered with whitish hairs that give them a silky appearance. When crushed, the fragrance is similar to chrysanthemum or pine. The flowers are yellow, small and tubular and are produced in terminal clusters that last about a month. One cultivar worth noting: 'Lambrook Silver' grows 3 feet tall and has striking silver foliage; it should be cut back in midsummer to promote branching and keep the plant attractive.

Culture: Wormwood can be grown from seed or you may prefer to buy plants from a garden center. The seeds need light to germinate. The plants tolerate any garden soil but prefer a poor, dry soil. To keep the plant attractive, cut off the old flowers since they turn brownish. It does not spread by stolons and remains in a clump. Trim the plants back in spring to prevent them from looking unkempt.

Uses: This plant gives its name to an aperitif, Absinthe, and is used as an ingredient in vermouth. Because of its silver foliage, it is a good accent to other flowering plants. It can be grown as a groundcover or interspersed with other perennials.

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3