



Plants of many merits

Many people grow herbs simply because it is fun, of all the plants none offers such great rewards for such little work. Sadly so often the ultimate fate of most herbs is to end as reminiscence. Herbs can help stretch the budget by changing ordinary ingredients into gourmet meals at home and turn everyday salads into extraordinary treats. Herb gardening brings extra dividends that include the delights of harvesting and preserving herbs in various ways for later enjoyment, ranging from decorative scented mixtures, winter bouquets, dried for infusions and tisanes, tasty herb vinegars, butters, salts, jellies. The list is endless.

The simplest way to capture the fragrances and tastes of summer are **herb vinegars** that can be made from almost any culinary herb. Vinegar, a classic preservative for food of every kind, preserves the very plants that give it a unique flavour. The simplest way to make herb vinegars that tempt the talents of the cook or put proudly on the kitchen shelf is to; tuck several washed sprigs of leaves in a bottle with a non-metal stop, fill with white distilled vinegar, shaking lightly to remove air bubbles from the plants, and leave in a cool dark place for several weeks.

Cider, perry or wine vinegars need herbs with stronger flavours, such as tarragon, mint, bay or basil. Some herbs add colour as well as flavour. Purple basil makes white distilled vinegar rich ruby red, a dash of basil vinegar gives tomato juice an added tang; garlic vinegar makes a tasty French dressing. The process can be speeded up by crushing the herb leaves and heat the vinegar to just below boiling point before adding the herbs and bottling. Strain after about 10 days to get rid of the residue and rebottle putting a fresh sprig of leaves in to create a flavouring that labels itself. Use a combination of herbs to make delicious vinegars to add finesse to winter salads. Redolent of summer try dill, burnet and small leaved 'Greek' basil with perry vinegar (www.theolivers.org.uk) or rosemary, sage and thyme with cider vinegar.

Herb butters – add marvellous flavours to crusty bread and delicious when melted over grilled fish and meats. Warm 250g butter to room temperature, add 8 tbs chopped fresh leaves (any variation of chives, tarragon, mint, oregano, basil, thyme, salad burnet, marjoram, dill, and fennel), little black pepper, squeeze of lemon juice and beat until fluffy. Finely diced shallot or garlic can also be added. Shape into a sausage and chill until required. Wrapped in foil, herb butter freezes well. Have fun experimenting with flavours. Smoked butter with dill, fennel, chives, and lemon zest is delicious with any grilled fresh water fish.

Sweet scented herb sugars. Any of the sweet scented herbs (mint, rose geranium, lavender, lemon verbena) can be used to give castor sugar a delicate hint of their fragrance. Simply put a few leaves or petals in a screw top jar with the sugar use to enhance the flavour of desserts, biscuits, cakes and ice cream.

Herb salts to enhance soups, stews and casseroles. Dry, in a low oven, parsley, thyme, rosemary, marjoram, basil, sage. Finely grind, add a tablespoon of each to a cup of table salt and a little ground black pepper and store in an air tight screw top jar.

Herb jellies are old favourites. There are so many recipes and combinations. More unusual ones are; elderberry and thyme, mint and gooseberry, orange and rosemary.