

## Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme

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The refrain of the English ballad “Scarborough Fair” has ensured that most people can recall the herbs parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. But there are hundreds of herbs that humans have cultivated for everything from flavoring a meal to medical preparations. Herbs have played such an important role that they have been given symbolic meaning. For the Romans parsley was a symbol of death and rebirth, often used to decorate tombs. Sage was a healing herb and thought to impart immortality and wisdom. Rosemary was the herb of remembrance used both at weddings and funerals. And thyme was said to give courage.

Over the years herbs have lost their symbolism and most people are only familiar with most common culinary herbs. The advent of pre-seasoned, ready-to-eat meals in the 1960s left a generation with little understanding of the use of herbs in the kitchen. Using fresh herbs became a rarity; only chefs and gourmet cooks were familiar with them. Knowledge of how to use herbs, previously passed from generation to generation, was almost lost.

Luckily times have changed; more people are cooking for enjoyment and exploring the taste experience that comes with renewed knowledge of herbs, both common and exotic. This has brought about an interest in growing fresh herbs that are readily at hand to enhance our home culinary efforts.

Historically, herbs were the primary source of medical treatments. Some herbs we use today still are. For example, the active ingredient in Listerine is thymol also known as oil of thyme, a powerful antiseptic. Rosemary, once used to treat depression and nervous tension, now is used in aromatherapy. It is said to be restorative and invigorating and is often added to shampoos, soaps

and body rubs. Many of our modern medicines have roots in the plant world. Active ingredients from plants have been separated and extracted or synthesized to make more potent drugs. Digitalis was originally extracted from foxglove.

The marketplace is full of a variety of herbal remedies. But we do not advocate self-medication. While the small amount of herbs used to flavor foods is relatively harmless, even herbs such as thyme, rosemary and sage when ingested in large doses can be dangerous, especially to pregnant women. Active compounds found in the plants are still being researched and it is not always certain what plants or dosage levels are safe or unsafe in certain individuals.

Herbs also had use in the household for their fragrance, as air fresheners, cleaners and insect repellents. Today, herbs offer unique textures and aromas to gardens. Tarragon and other species of *Artemisia*, like wormwood have interesting foliage and contrast well with floral displays. Fragrant herbs, like sweet Annie, add their sweet smell to the home. Some herbs offer a delightful lemon scent to the garden like lemon verbena. Thyme and Roman chamomile are low growing and release their scent when walked upon. Sage offers nicely textured leaves, flowers and an aromatic clean scent.

Most herbs need well-drained soil, are relatively easy to grow and do well in containers. If you are interested in learning more about herbs, their uses, and culture come and explore Farmpark’s Plant Science Center. The Plant Science Center hosts several herb gardens comprised of cooking herbs and a variety of household and medicinal herbs. And for more hands-on knowledge, call (440) 358-7275 to sign up for our May program “Herbs Etc.” and take home a planted bowl of herbs and some sage knowledge on herb use, cultivation and history.



Sage plant



Container of parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme