
All the better for Basil



Big flashy vegetables like tomatoes make for pretty pictures and harvest bragging rights, but allotting space in the garden plan for a few humble herbs will have taste buds rejoicing. There are many aromatic and flavorful herbs to choose from, but the perfect garden herb may very well be basil. It's easy to grow, compact, produces abundantly, and when it comes to eating it's the perfect pair for those prized tomatoes.

With a little planning, basil can be enjoyed for the full growing season. For the earliest possible harvest, start basil seeds indoors 6 to 8 weeks prior to planting. Or buy already started plants. In either case, the plant will be roughly 6 inches tall when it's ready to make the transition to the garden. Be absolutely certain all risk of freezing has passed before considering moving plants to outdoor pots or gardens. Basil is a very tender plant that will not survive even the lightest freeze.

Though tender to frost, basil doesn't need babying beyond protection from cold. In fact, it needs to be pinched back or harvested regularly to keep up production and maintain the best taste. Basil is best kept short and not allowed to flower. Plants should not be allowed to develop more than about 7 leaves per branch and it's usually ready to be pinched back for the first time already at transplant.

Once the plant has around 7-8 leaves, either pinch it back or prune to right above the second pair of leaves. This removes the apical growing point which will cue axillary buds at the base of the leaves left on the plant to spring to life sending out more branches each with more delicious basil leaves. The apical bud produces a hormone that keeps axillary buds from growing. If it isn't removed, basil will simply grow tall and gangly producing few leaves and skipping straight to flowering, rendering the plant useless for harvest. However, if regularly harvested it will bush out producing many flavorful leaves to bring out the best in summer dishes.

After basil gets established and temperatures are sufficiently warm, it grows quickly providing enough fresh leaves for harvest about once per week. Basil can be very bountiful. Depending on the gardener's plans, just a few plants may suit their needs. Though it differs somewhat between variety and if the plant was started indoors or seeded directly in the garden, each plant will produce multiple cups of basil per growing season.

Early Use

Starting with the very first pinching of leaves at transplant, gardeners can put basil to work in the kitchen. Pair the early harvest with spinach and other greens that thrive in cool weather and are

usually among the first garden harvests of the year. Mixed together they make for a fresh, flavorful salad.

Instead of reaching in the spice cupboard for dried basil to satisfy recipes, head to the garden with scissors and snip a few fresh leaves instead. Basil is most flavorful when used fresh and should be added near the end of the cooking process to deliver the greatest impact on a dish.

Because basil is prolific, a gardener may opt to purchase or grow just a few started plants and then also seed more directly in the garden. This allows for early small uses but sets the stage for a large harvest toward the end of the season to pair with the ripening tomatoes and possibly preserving some of the herb for off-season use.

Crazy for Caprese

When picking tomatoes, one should always pick basil, too. The two go together like peas and carrots—even better many would say. There are many ways to combine the two to great satisfaction. Try a caprese salad. Simply slice a large fresh tomato, alternately layer it with fresh basil leaves and slices of fresh mozzarella cheese before topping with olive oil and adding salt and pepper to taste. You'll note the repetition of fresh and that's precisely the description of the dish — a beautiful, fresh taste that simply screams of summer.

For a bite-sized crunchy version, try a variation of the same dish on your favorite cracker. Layer a cracker, cheese (swiss or provolone work nicely, too), torn basil leaf, and top with half of a cherry tomato—another classic garden overproducer. Drizzle with olive oil and add salt and pepper. These make great appetizers for parties or just an afternoon snack. The delicious bites pack even more flavor when the basil leaves are replaced with pesto.

Where there's fresh basil there simply must be pesto. Follow one of many recipes, or play it by ear, to produce a treat that will take the previously described dishes, pastas, pizza, sandwiches—you name it—to the next culinary level. For a simple pesto, toss a couple handfuls of basil leaves in a blender or food processor with some walnuts (or pine nuts) and garlic. Process until they're finely minced and then slowly stream in olive oil while still processing. Once smooth, add in some grated parmesan cheese as the final touch. Searching out a recipe with precise measurements may help guide the first run but making pesto can easily be freehanded as experience is gained.

The first frost will be the end of the road for any basil left in the garden, but there are ways to get continued enjoyment. As fall approaches potted basil can be brought indoors or plants from the garden can even be dug and transplanted into pots to bring inside to continue producing. To stock the spice cupboard from your own garden, dry basil by hanging or laying it out to dry in a low-humidity area. Dry entire stems but harvest just the leaves once dried. Fresh basil can also be frozen. Preserved may not be as perfect as fresh leaves, but the previous year's basil will certainly

hold taste buds over until the ground warms again the next spring.

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