Chapter 1

Why Grow Herbs?

In This Chapter

- Recognizing herbs
- Using herbs in food, medicine, crafts, and more
- Enjoying the history and lore of herbs

Gardeners love kindred souls, and if you decide to grow herbs, you'll be in the company of plenty of kindred souls, both in the present and from times past.

Even before recorded history, herbs were the sources of countless culinary, medicinal, and craft materials. Historically, growing herbs wasn't a hobby; it was necessary for survival. Then, during the last half century or so, chemists began developing synthetic forms of aromas, flavors, medicines, and dyes that formerly had been extracted from herbs. (Notice how often artificial flavors and colors appear in the ingredients lists on packaged foods.) Because it was cheaper to make these imitations in a lab than it was to grow and extract the real thing, herb gardening fell out of favor to some degree. Now that the "better living through chemistry" heyday is over, there's renewed interest in getting back to natural sources of the stuff we ingest and otherwise use in our daily lives. And herb gardening is experiencing a renaissance.

This chapter is a potpourri of herb information — our effort to introduce you to the subject, including some of its historical and entertaining aspects, and to inspire you to join the legions of herb gardeners, past, present, and future.

What Makes an Herb an Herb?

Before we talk about growing herbs, it's only fitting to define the meaning of the word *herb.* (We pronounce it "erb" with a silent "h." If you want to sound British, pronounce the "h," as in the name Herb.) What, exactly, is an herb? Different resources define the word in different ways, depending upon their frame of reference.

A biologist might use the term *herb* as shorthand for *herbaceous plant* — a plant that forms a soft, tender stem rather than a woody stem. However, that definition leaves out many plants that are typically considered herbs, including rosemary, a charter member of the culinary herb hall of fame. And it includes plants like daffodils, which aren't on anyone's herb list.

Some *ethnobotanists* (people who study plants in the context of how they're used by different social groups) might define herbs as "useful plants," but hundreds of plants are useful, such as corn and oats, that few of us would call herbs. Others define herbs as "plants grown for medicinal qualities and for seasoning foods," but that definition leaves out dye plants, plants used in rituals, and those used for making cosmetics, crafts, and more.

The Herb Society of America (HSA) follows the "big-tent" philosophy and defines herbs as plants valued for their "flavor, fragrance, medicinal and healthful qualities, economic and industrial uses, pesticide properties, and coloring materials." If it's good enough for the HSA, it's good enough — and broad enough — for us. So if you've planted something that tastes or smells good (or bad), cures what ails you, or can be used in some way, feel free to call it an herb. You won't get an argument from us.

As for this book, we focus on some of the most common herbs that are popular for their flavor, their medicinal qualities, and other purposes. Most of their names will be familiar, even if you haven't sown a single seed.

Seeing Why and Where to Grow Herbs

If you garden at all, you've probably grown some herbs, even if you weren't aware of it. If you have bee balm, lavender, roses, or sage in your ornamental beds, you're growing herbs. Ditto if you tuck in some basil, fennel, or garlic among your edibles. But if you need more convincing to add herbs to your garden plant palette, here are a few reasons to give them a try:

- **Herbs are versatile.** They're pretty, smell nice, are useful, or all of the above.
- **Many herbs are easy to grow.** Annual herbs like basil, cilantro, and nasturtium are among the most reliable plants, even for beginner gardeners.
- **They benefit other plants.** Even if you don't plan to harvest and use the herbs directly, you'll enjoy the way some herbs repel pests and attract beneficial insects.
- **Herbs are great conversation starters.** Once you know a bit of lore about the plants you're growing, you can entertain garden visitors with their historical significance or fun factoids.
- **They'll kick up the flavor of your culinary creations.** Fresh rosemary, thyme, or tarragon can turn an everyday dish into a gourmet delight.

- **You'll save money.** If you've ever looked at herbs in the supermarket, you've probably noticed two things about them: They usually appear wilted or shriveled, and they're very expensive. If you grow your own herbs, you'll have access to the freshest herbs possible — clipped right before you need them — for a fraction of the price.

Herbs in your garden

You don't need a special herb garden to grow herbs. Most herbs are very companionable and happily share garden space with more flamboyant ornamentals or more familiar edibles. (A notable few, described in Chapter 2, are decidedly invasive and should be avoided or grown in a confined area.) For ideas on designing your herb garden, as well as incorporating herbs into your existing beds, flip to Chapter 4.

Herbs in containers

Even if you don't have a backyard garden, you can still grow herbs. Most herbs readily adapt to growing in containers, and some can even be grown on a sunny windowsill. And even if you have a big yard, you may want to grow some of your favorite culinary herbs in pots just steps away from the kitchen for easy harvesting. Find out more about growing herbs in containers in Chapter 6.

Considering Culinary Herbs

Before the advent of refrigeration, herbs with antibacterial properties, including garlic, oregano, and thyme, were enlisted to help preserve foods that had to be stored for use during times of scarcity, such as in midwinter when fresh foods were hard to come by. These and other herbs and spices with strong flavors and aromas were also used to mask the tastes and smells of foods that were beginning to go rancid, making them more palatable.

Now that we can control the temperature in our refrigerator with the turn of a dial, most of us enjoy herbs for the way they enhance the flavor and coloring of food and drink. Most recipes contain one or more ingredients purely for aesthetics — better taste, more attractive presentation. What would pickles be without dill, or pesto without basil?

Purists use the word *herb* to refer to plants grown for their leaves and stems; *spices* are those cultivated for their flowers, seeds, bark, wood, resin, and roots. You also may come across the word *potherb.* That's an old term that refers to vegetables and herbs used in salads, soups, and stews. For our purposes, *spices* are culinary herbs.

Upping your nutrition quota

If aesthetics aren't a good enough reason to grow herbs, consider the fact that many herbs are good for you, too. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), a teaspoon of dill seed contains 32 milligrams of calcium; a teaspoon of ground basil contains 6 milligrams of magnesium.

But when it comes to nutrients, the herbal champ is the chili pepper: One teaspoon of chili powder contains potassium, sodium, ascorbic acid (vitamin C), niacin, and vitamin A. (However, if you decide to substitute chili powder for your multivitamin, we recommend taking each teaspoon with a gallon of milk to offset the heat of the chili.)

A few culinary herbs have recently made the news because of their antioxidant levels. *Antioxidants* are chemicals contained in plants that are thought to play a role in preventing some forms of cancer, as well as in helping to slow the aging process. In one study researchers tested the antioxidant levels of a variety of herbs and found the highest levels in oregano, sage, peppermint, and thyme. They concluded that herbs are an important source of dietary antioxidants, right up there with red wine and green tea.

Finding ways to cook with herbs

There's nothing like freshly harvested rosemary tossed in with roasted potatoes or chopped basil topping a bowl of pasta. Scan any cookbook worth its salt, and you'll find inspiring ways to incorporate herbs into your meals. If you have a particular herb in mind, flip to its entry in the appendix for tips on using it. When you start growing herbs, you'll be inspired to try things you might never have considered. (We've all tasted mint-flavored ice cream, but how about making your own using bee balm or lavender?)

Adding flavor to oils, vinegars, dressings, and marinades

Browse supermarket shelves and you'll find a growing array of herb-flavored oils and vinegars, usually at premium prices. The same goes for salad dressings and marinades. But there's no need to break the bank to enjoy the flavors provided by these products. You can easily create homemade versions using fresh ingredients right from your garden. (And you can feel safe without the artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives that give store-bought products an extended shelf life.) In Chapter 12 you'll find recipes galore.

Brewing herbal teas

Your choice in the tea section at the grocery store used to be simple: Lipton or Tetley? Now there are dozens, if not hundreds, of variations on the tea theme, some that are combined with traditional tea *(Camellia sinensis)* and others that are completely herbal: from hibiscus to blueberry to chai to acai, with many teas touted for their health-boosting properties as well as their taste. Certainly some of these teas contain exotic ingredients grown in some far-off land, but many are made from herbs you can easily grow yourself. Flip to Chapter 12 for suggestions on flavorful herb combinations, as well as a few recipes to try.

Exploring Medicinal Herbs

Plants and medicines have been partners as far back as history reaches, and the partnership continues today. In the last few decades, both echinacea and St. John's wort have become popular herbal remedies, both readily found on supermarket and pharmacy shelves. More recently, supplements containing ginkgo, ginseng, goji berry, acai, goldenseal, and licorice root have invaded store shelves.

Historically, different cultures have taken a variety of approaches to herbal remedies. Many Eastern cultures, for example, traditionally view illness as a sign of cosmic disharmony. Herbal cures are calculated to restore balance — to create peace between the opposing principles of yin and yang — rather than treat specific problems. The European herbal medicine tradition has been less holistic, and is usually focused on treating symptoms rather than preventing problems. The ancient Greeks, for example, viewed life in terms of four universal elements — earth, air, fire, and water — and the four bodily humors — sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic (hot, cold, moist, and dry, respectively). "Hot" and "dry" herbs were prescribed for "cold" and "moist" ailments, and vice versa. Astronomy, too, has played a role in herbal medicine, and old herbals are filled with references to herbs "owned by Venus" or "under the dominion of the moon."

People have prescribed herbs for every condition known to humankind: boils and burns, coughs and constipation, drunkenness and dog bites, fevers and fits, giddiness and gout, heartaches and hiccups, impotence and indigestion, nightmares and nerves, snoring and sneezing, and worms and wounds. Chapter 13 is the place to find information and recipes for herbal remedies you can make from your own homegrown herbs.

You may be skeptical about the power of fennel to cure "every kind of poison in a man's body" — the claim in one 13th-century herbal — but plants are unquestionably rich with substances that can ease, cure, and even prevent diseases. Early physicians called herbs *simples,* meaning that each herb was a simple, or single, medicine, not a compound medicine. In fact, most herbs contain more than one chemical compound — nearly 1,500 have been isolated to date.

Making history

More than a few herbs deserve a place on everyone's plants-that-changed-the-world list. Willow bark (*Salix* species) from which acetylsalicylic acid, or aspirin, was derived in 1899, comes near the top of that enumeration. Other candidates? Quinine (*Cinchona* species), the original drug to cure malaria; opium poppy *(Papaver somniferum),* the world's most important painkiller; foxglove *(Digitalis lanata),* one of the first heart medicines; and hemp *(Cannabis sativa),* which has kept people tied up in knots — or, when smoked, has freed them from time and space.

Herbal remedies aren't just quaint relics of days gone by; in fact, we've only begun to discover the power of plants to enrich and improve our lives. The bark of the neem tree *(Azadirachta indica),* which has been used for centuries in India as a cure for all sorts of ailments from acne to malaria, is now being investigated for its antiviral properties. And common cinnamon, which comes from the inner bark of the cinnamon tree (*Cinnamomum* species), is being used to lower blood sugar in Type 2 diabetics.

Going mainstream

Herbal remedies have moved from the hippie/back-to-the-land fringe and are now mainstream. To wit: On her Web site (`www.marthastewart.com`), Martha Stewart gives detailed instructions on how to make your own herbal remedies along with tips on how to fold fitted sheets. And the magazine section of the Sunday newspaper regularly features snippets about the latest research results regarding the medicinal qualities of this or that herb, right alongside news about the most recent celebrity scandal.

Food or drug . . . or neither?

Before herbal remedies became big business, most were homemade or made in small batches, with the grower/producer selling directly to the end user. Because the government didn't regulate or oversee these transactions, consumers had to trust that the herbal concoctions contained what their makers said they did. However, over the last few decades, interest in "natural" remedies has grown, and bigger and bigger players — including large pharmaceutical companies — have entered the market, driving the stakes higher. Talk began to circulate about the possibility of the government stepping in to regulate herbal remedies. The reaction was swift and strong. Manufacturers feared that government regulations would prevent them from selling their wares; consumers rebelled against government control over what they could put into their bodies. A grassroots campaign to limit government regulation was successful, and the result was the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 (DSHEA).

You may have noticed that the medicinal claims of herbal products are couched in vague terms and that the products are described as supplements, not remedies. There's a good reason for this. The DSHEA defines a dietary supplement as a product that's intended to supplement the diet rather than cure a disease. The result is that the makers of dietary supplements are permitted to make broad claims that the product can support this or that structure or function. For example, vendors can say that echinacea supplements "support a healthy immune system" or that chamomile "calms the digestive tract." They can't claim that the product cures an ailment; doing so would change the product classification from supplement to drug, and thus require the clinical trials and rigorous testing pharmaceutical companies must do before introducing a medicine to the market.

Under DSHEA, a manufacturer is responsible for determining that the dietary supplements it makes are safe and that claims made about them are substantiated by adequate evidence to show that they aren't false or misleading. However, dietary supplements don't need FDA approval before they're marketed.

Creating Herbal Body Care Products: Beauty or Bust?

From rosemary shampoo to calendula salve, herbal body care products command top dollar. A close look at the ingredients (which are listed in order of the relative amounts of each ingredient, from most to least) often reveals just how little of the touted herb is actually in the product. For example, to make shampoos sound like they contain lots of herbs, some labels start their ingredient list with "an aqueous solution of herbs," which sounds fancier than the translation: "water with some herbs in it." Because water is a main ingredient in shampoo anyway, this is a clever way to make it sound like the shampoo contains a high concentration of herbs when, in reality, it gives no indication of the actual amount of herbs. That's not to say that herbs can't play a role in body care products, but rather that the premium price you're paying may be going toward marketing or fancy labels rather than expensive ingredients. In many cases, you can grow your own herbs and make your own products for a fraction of the cost, using the ingredients that you want and leaving out those that you don't. Chapter 14 delves into the art of making your own herbal body care products and includes recipes for hair care, skin care, and fragrances.

Using Herbs for Hearth and Home

The usefulness of herbs extends beyond their culinary, medicinal, and body care properties and into the realm of hearth and home. Perhaps as many, if not more, herbs are now grown for decorative uses — potpourris, sachets, pressed flower art, and the like. Some herbs are utilized to dye paper, fabric, yarn, and other craft materials. In Chapter 15, we introduce these and some of the other ways herbs are used, such as to create wreaths and bouquets, and to make bug repellants, cleaning compounds, and more.

Looking at Herb Folklore

In addition to their ties to the kitchen and medicine chest, herbs have an ancient connection to rites and myths. The lotus *(Nelumbo nucifera)* was sacred to Isis, the Egyptian goddess of fertility; white roses (*Rosa* species) and Madonna lilies *(Lilium candidum)* represent the Virgin Mary; victorious Greek athletes were awarded wreaths of bay *(Laurus nobilis).* The following sections describe some of the tall tales that herbs have inspired and the superpowers that have been ascribed to herbs through the ages.

Sage renders men immortal, and other tall tales

As the saying goes, "Never let the facts get in the way of a good story." Herbs come bearing as many stories as they do names — and many of the tales have nothing to do with the facts. But they're wonderful fun, evocative connections with people and events in other places and other times. Knowing about them makes growing and using herbs a richer experience.

Absolutely every herb is laden with reputed associations and powers. Yarrow, for example, has been cultivated for at least 5,000 years. Most plant-name scholars believe it gets its genus name *Achillea* from Achilles, the warrior hero of *The Iliad.* Achilles, according to one version of the Greek myth, used yarrow during the Trojan War to treat the wounds of Telephus, the son of Heracles, as well as his own soldiers — leading to one of the other common names, staunchweed.

Yarrow is also associated with seeing into the future. According to British folklore, a woman could discover who her husband would be if she picked yarrow leaves in a churchyard and recited this verse:

> Yarrow, sweet yarrow, the first that I have found,
>
> In the name of sweet Jesus, I pluck thee from the ground;
>
> As Joseph loved Mary, and took her for his dear,
>
> So in a dream this night, my love will appear.

Following are some other examples of the folklore surrounding herbs:

- Sorrel turns red in autumn (and its leaves turn toward graveyards) in honor of the blood spilled by Irish soldiers more than 1,000 years ago.
- Prometheus used a fennel stalk as the torch when he stole fire from the gods and brought it to earth.
- Diana, goddess of the hunt, was so enraged that one of her nymphs didn't come to her defense that she turned her nymph into a violet.
- Rosemary, according to Christian legends, never grows taller than 6 feet, which was Christ's height.
- In a Peruvian legend, the nasturtium sprang up from a sack of gold ripped from the hands of thieving Spaniards by the god of the mountains.
- Garlic sprang from Satan's left footprint when he left the Garden of Eden.
- The white rose was born of Venus's tears, crying over the slain Adonis. Red roses are the result of Cupid's spilling a cup of wine.

Virtues of delight

If the legends and tales about herbs are numerous, their reputed virtues, or powers, are super-numerous — and often supernatural. Herbs can protect against devils and witches, predict the future, make people fall in love, take away sadness, and instill bravery. Herbs can also bring good luck, as anyone who finds a four-leaf clover knows.

Take a look at these other "virtuous" examples:

- Placing rosemary leaves under your pillow prevents nightmares.
- To see ghosts, wear lavender.
- Pick wild chervil and you'll break your mother's heart.
- A sprig of bay protects against being struck by lightning.
- Sniffing basil breeds scorpions in the brain.
- A hedge of rue keeps out witches, but rue left at the church will curse a marriage.

Mulling over mullein

The woolly leaved mullein (see the accompanying figure) has been prescribed for scores of ailments — everything from toothaches, coughs, and "fluxes of the body" to warts, colic, and "stiff sinews."

Mullein *(Verbascum thapsus)* is a good example of a multi-purpose herb. For example, people first coated mullein stalks with suet or pitch and used them as torches more than 2,000 years ago. Mullein has been used in sorcery to light midnight covens (and to guard against witches). American colonists made dyes from its roots and flowers, and stuffed its leaves in their mattresses (and in their shoes to keep their feet warm). Children have turned its leaves into doll blankets, and adults (and more than a few adolescents) have smoked them in place of tobacco — even as a treatment for coughs and lung ailments.

Women once rubbed mullein leaves on their cheeks to stimulate a fresh blush instead of using rouge. Mullein decoctions were used to kill worms in livestock, and the herb's honey-scented flowers have flavored drinks and perfumed rooms. Plants were also used as weather predictors: If the blooms clustered at the top of the stalk, a late winter with heavy snow was said to be certain. Flowers thrown into the hearth fire were thought to protect a house against storms.

Read All About It

This book focuses on the nuts and bolts of growing and using herbs, with some folklore thrown in because it's just so much fun. If you want to delve further into herb folklore and traditional cures, turn to *herbals,* books containing descriptions and uses of plants. The oldest surviving herbals date back 2,000 years. Most were written by physicians (but also by astrologers and alchemists) and combined botany, natural history, horticulture, cooking, medicine, myth, magic — and mistakes. These are some of the names you'll encounter when reading about herbs:

- **Dioscorides:** The Greek physician (first century A.D.) whose writing *(De Materia Medica)* was influential into the 1700s
- **Galen:** The second-century Greek physician who codified existing medical knowledge and popularized the theory of humors
- **William Turner:** The 16th-century author of the first "scientific" English herbal, *New Herball*
- **John Gerard:** Herbalist-gardener author of the most famous and important of all herbals, *Herball or General Historie of Plants* (1597)

- **John Parkinson:** English gardener and author of the enormous *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640), which describes more than 4,000 plants
- **Nicholas Culpeper:** An English astrologer/physician and author of the influential *English Physician*, an early version of the home medical reference that has been a strong seller ever since it was published in 1652

You don't need to live near the British Museum or the Vatican to have access to ancient herbals. Most have been reprinted in inexpensive editions and are available at bookstores, online, or in libraries.

You must take the information with a proverbial grain of salt when you delve into their pages. These are the texts, after all, that include illustrated descriptions of the fanciful goose tree. (John Gerard was among those who insisted it was real: "I have seene with mine eies, and handled with mine hands.") In case you haven't seen one with your "eies," the goose tree is covered with shells in which, Gerard wrote, "are contained little living creatures." If the creatures fell into water, they became birds, "bigger than a Mallard, and lesser than a Goose." If all this weren't zany enough, 16th-century clerics argued over whether or not tree geese were fowl or vegetable, which affected whether or not they could be eaten during Lent, a period of penance and fasting for some Christians.

You can't read about herbs without running into a reference to the Doctrine of Signatures. It was a theory popularized in the 16th century by a Swiss alchemist, physician, and herbalist who wrote under the name Paracelsus. The Doctrine of Signatures claimed that plants had signatures, or visible qualities, that indicated which ailments they could cure.

Because lettuce contained a milky sap, for example, it was recommended for mothers who were having problems nursing their babies. Herbs with heart-shaped leaves were prescribed for heart ailments (including those that were romantic in nature). Garlic, which has a hollow stem, was said to cure obstructions of the windpipe, and hanging mosses were believed to be antidotes to baldness. Herbs with spotted leaves were prescribed for lung diseases, while those with thorns were recommended for removing splinters. Herbs with yellow flowers were remedies for jaundice. Presumably, herbs with multi-colored leaves or flowers can cure aging surfers still addicted to Hawaiian shirts.