



The DIRT Society Kitchen Herb Microgardening

Microgardens are small, isolated plots of food crops; most often grown in a city or where space is limited. In large U.S. cities,

however, there is a general sense of having too little time to nurture and tend a garden. Moreover, many urbanites may earn enough money to purchase ingredients that have already been harvested and processed. This results in a nearly complete detachment between consumer and product; a dangerous situation that results in misspent money, bad investments and purchaser ignorance. The microgarden; small, simple, and efficient; is a way that city-dwellers can gain some food independence without sacrificing too much time.

What sets a microgarden apart, as the name suggests, is its size. These gardens can be grown in single planters, an assortment of small containers, or tiny raised beds. They are often situated on rooftops, balconies, window sills, porches, or small yards.

The first things to consider prior to beginning an herb garden:

1. **Where will I grow these plants?** Ideally, herbs would have about 6 hours of sunlight every day, but many are more shade tolerant. Some withstand heat; some are hardy in cold, exposed areas. Once you know the location of your microgarden, you can isolate which herbs will grow well.
2. **Which herbs do I use in my cooking? Which would I like to learn to use?** While many gardeners will grow plants for other purposes, such as deterring pests, adding color, or disease prevention, the most common consideration for a beginning gardener would be; which would I like to eat? Still, variety is a boon to most gardens, and trying new flavors can only enrich the life of a consumer.

Next, a gardener should consider the best utilization of the space they have available. There are hundreds of ways to grow a healthy variety of plants in a small space, and making the most of your limited area will require a little ingenuity on your part.

Some examples of common microgarden arrangements are:

- **Individual Pots** - The size of the container will vary to suit the plant, but pots can easily be moved to maximize growing season and arranged to create aesthetic appeal. Some herbs grow better in containers than they do in a garden, so a varied microgarden will likely include at least



a few individually potted plants. Receptacles used to pot plants can vary. Garden store planters, recycled jars and tins, plastic bottles and cement blocks are all prolifically used. The key to a great container is that it is non-toxic, sturdy, and drains well.

- **Small Beds** - Very few herbs react badly when grown in a mixed bed. Most herbs serve as companion plants; not only to each other, but also to various fruits, vegetables, and ornamental flowers. If harvested frequently, many herbs can be kept small and live non-invasively. Thus, in a single planter box or in a small raised bed, multiple herbs can mature side-by-side. You must consider, however, the moisture and light preferences of the herbs you plant together. It is always best to match the needs of plants, as it makes upkeep simple.



- **Vertical Gardening** - To maximize the output of a small area, many gardeners will incorporate a vertical element when they plan a garden. To do this, you could buy or build a tiered planter box, hang herbs in windows or outside, or create a completely vertical garden by planting herbs in pockets within a modified wall space. Vertical gardens are not only successful in that they allow a gardener to grow more on



less ground; they also remove competition between plants which, otherwise, may overtake one another or compete for a light source.

Some rules of thumb when arranging herb seedlings or young plants in a shared space:

Mint plants are notoriously invasive. They will grow to fill the space provided; taking over other plants and dominating a shared plot. **Mint** is best grown isolated in its own container.

Fennel may kill off many herbs and vegetables when grown in a shared space. This herb, like **Mint**, should be separated.

If you are growing herbs in small containers, consider herbs with less voluminous root systems and less weighty bodies. **Dill** and **Thyme** both grow very well in small pots and jars.

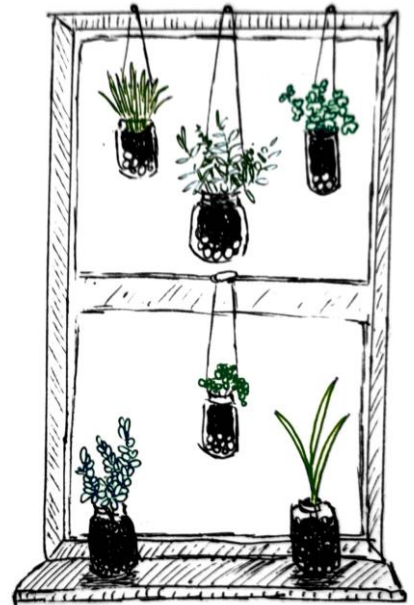
Group plants by life span, if possible. Perennials will experience periods of dormancy and then reemerge when a growing season begins. Annuals grow for only one season, and must be replaced. It is best not to disturb perennials by repeatedly digging up surrounding soil to remove and replant annuals.

Common perennials include mint, sage, rosemary, thyme, lavender, oregano and chives.

Common annuals include basil, cilantro/coriander, dill, cumin and fennel.

Dividing plants by moisture requirement will make upkeep much simpler for the gardener. **Basil, Chives, Cilantro** and **Dill** are herbs that grow best in damp earth. To prevent excess water loss and keep them hydrated, a layer of mulch can be applied to the top of the soil. **Thyme, Rosemary** and **Oregano** all respond best to semi-dry, well drained soils. Mixing the two groups of plants may result in difficult watering patterns or poor plant health.

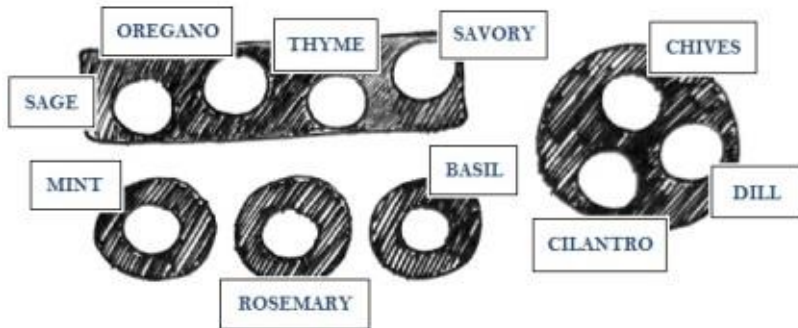
Plants will need to be fertilized occasionally. If you are not incorporating composted materials into your soil, you may choose to brew or buy a fertilizer to encourage plant growth and health. Apply fertilizers carefully; too much could mean rapid growth, but might also result in bland-tasting herbs. Typically, herbs in healthy soil will only need one or two "booster" fertilizations in a growing season.



The sketches below illustrate a few well-planned kitchen herb microgardens. You may imitate these, of course, or create your own system.

The Easy Care Garden:

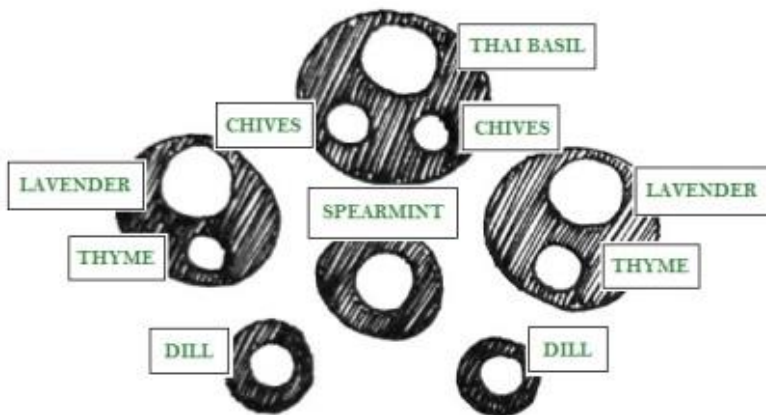
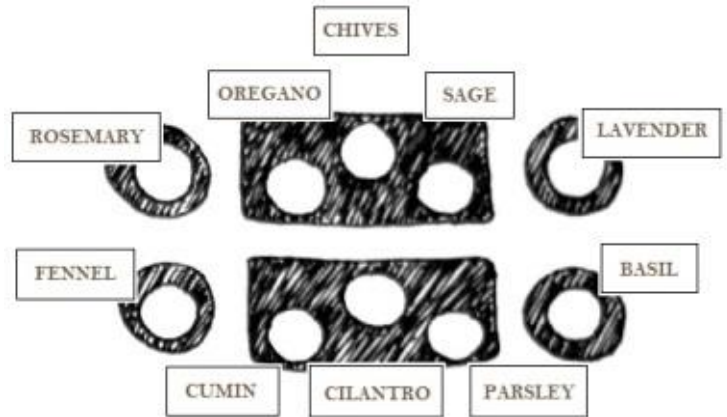
The herbs in this garden are arranged by their basic needs. This allows the gardener to provide the same level of maintenance to two separate groups. The planter box containing Sage,



Oregano, Thyme and Savory, as well as the Mint and Rosemary plants, all require moderate watering and well-drained soil. The other plants; Chives, Dill, Cilantro and Basil, all require slightly more frequent watering, and moist, rich soil.

The Indoor/Outdoor Garden:

During the growing season, all planters can be moved outside to a sunny spot. However, these plants are separated into perennials and annuals; meaning that one group (the perennials) can be wintered indoors and set back outside the following year. The containers that house annual herbs will need to be replanted each season. With this arrangement, the gardener runs little risk of shocking or disturbing the perennials' root systems.



The Colorful Garden:

As aesthetically pleasing as it is functional and delicious, this garden is arranged to show off the colors and blossoms of some of the most attractive kitchen herbs.