

HERBS AT HOME

Following practical tips will flavor winter's dull days

By Karen Panter

Growing herbs inside during the depths of winter adds a touch of green to your life and flavor to your plate while the world outside is dormant and bare. Success requires understanding the plants' needs in the way of light, temperature, watering, fertilizing, and insect and disease control.

Light

Light levels are the limiting factor in growing any plant indoors. Most herbs require high light levels, so choose a south, west, or east window if you have one. Think about this: at 1 foot away from a south window, a plant will receive about 100 footcandles of light. Move the plant to two feet away from the window, and guess what? The light available drops to 25 footcandles! And three

feet away the levels plummet to 11 footcandles. Keep your plants as close to a window as possible without exposing them to temperature extremes. Most do best with about eight hours of light daily.

If there isn't a good spot near a window, fluorescent grow lights can be used. Plants use blue and red light for photosynthesis, so try to find fluorescent or LED (light emitting diode) lights high in the blue and red spectrums. Or try using a well-placed mirror to reflect light in the room back toward the plants to increase light levels.

If there is too much light, plants will wilt easily and may show browning on the edges of the leaves. If this happens, move the plant a few inches farther away from the window or place a thin curtain between the window and the plant.

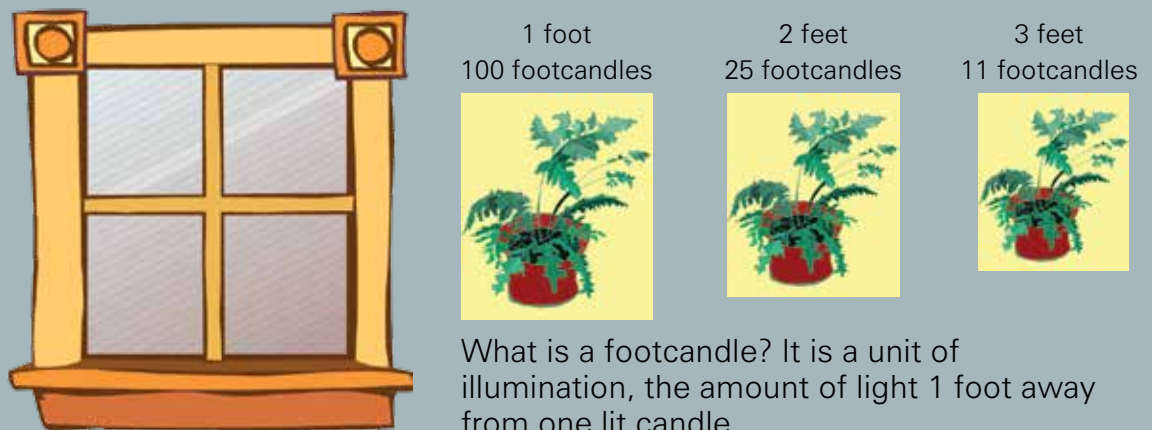


Figure 1. Light levels decrease rapidly as you move away from a light source, like a window.

Herbs to Grow

Table 1 shows common herbs that will grow well indoors.

COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	Typical WEEKS TO HARVEST from transplanting	PLANT PART TO USE
SWEET BASIL	<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	6 to 8	leaves, whole plant, seeds
CILANTRO (CORIANDER)	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	8 to 10	leaves, whole plant, seeds
COMMON CHIVES	<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	9 to 12	whole plant
FERNLEAF DILL	<i>Anethum graveolens</i>	8 to 10	leaves, whole plant seeds
PARSLEY	<i>Petroselinum neopolitanum</i>	9 to 11	leaves or whole plant
GREEK OREGANO	<i>Origanum vulgare</i>	10 to 12	leaves or whole plant
SAGE	<i>Salvia officinalis</i>	10 to 12	leaves
SPEARMINT	<i>Mentha spicata</i>	10 to 12	leaves
SWEET MARJORAM	<i>Origanum majorana</i>	10 to 12	leaves or whole plant
COMMON THYME	<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	10 to 12	leaves
ROSEMARY	<i>Rosemarinus officinalis</i>	12 to 14	leaves

FERTILIZING TIPS

- Slow-release fertilizer will help avoid over-fertilizing
- Plants usually do best with small amounts of nutrients consistently available
- Do not apply fertilizers if the growing mix is dry (you'll "burn" the roots)
- More fertilizer is not better
- Organic or synthetic types are equally acceptable (the plants can't tell the difference)



Temperature

Most herbs are adaptable and happy with temperatures found in most homes; however, avoid spots near doors or drafty areas where temperature extremes, wind, or damage from people and pets may occur.

Types of Pots

Use any type of container you like. Clay tends to be heavy, and it is porous and will dry more quickly than plastic pots. Plastic pots are durable and lightweight and dry out less quickly. The size of container should be dictated by the plant's size and also the amount of water it requires.

Growing Mix

Using native soil is not recommended. Native soils are heavy and often hold too much moisture and not enough oxygen. They also often contain weed seeds and plant pathogens. Instead, buy a good quality, pre-bagged growing mix from a reputable garden center. Those containing water-absorbing crystals are not recommended.

Water

Watering herbs or any plant indoors is the most important task for a grower. Herbs generally prefer

consistent moisture (moist but not soggy potting mix), so water plants promptly and thoroughly when the mix becomes too dry, but do not let the pots sit in water – this will lead to root rot. Remember, plant roots require both water and oxygen to be healthy.

Fertilizing

Herbs are often grown for their leaves or shoots, which are harvested. They need to take up a steady supply of nutrients to grow new leaves and shoots. There is a limited volume of growing mix in any container, which then limits the nutrient supply to the plant. Fertilizer can help supply these plant needs. A variety of soluble liquid and powder fertilizer formulations can be purchased. They vary greatly in strength and composition, so make sure to follow label directions carefully. Slow-release fertilizer types are also available from a number of different manufacturers. Read and follow directions closely. If concerned about over-fertilizing, use half the label rate but apply a little more frequently.

Potential Problems

Insects and mites like herbs, too.

The most common pests are aphids, whiteflies, mealy bugs, and spider mites. To minimize problems with insects and mites, try to keep the plants as healthy as possible so they can fend off invaders easily. If pests appear, take the plant to the sink (or outside if warm enough) and rinse off the foliage, especially the undersides of the leaves, to dislodge some of these pests. Severe infestations may require discarding the plants.

Watering Tips

- Use a good-quality growing medium (you usually get what you pay for with these) – usually those with well-known brand names work well – don't skimp
- Make sure there are drainage holes in the bottoms of the pots
- Make sure to use a plastic saucer under the pots (not clay if placed on a surface that will be marred by water because water will seep through clay)
- When you water, water should run out the drainage hole to reduce salt buildup (toss out the drainage water)
- Don't let pots sit in the excess water (roots need adequate oxygen)
- Water according to the plant's needs and not the calendar
- Use larger containers for plants requiring more water (they don't dry out as fast)
- Try not to let potting mixes consisting mostly of peat moss or coconut fiber dry out as they can be very difficult to re-wet (mildly warm water works better than cold when re-wetting)



Basil



Chives



Lavendar



Marjoram



Oregano



Rosemary

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