

BASIL (*Ocimum basilicum*)

Basil is a sun-loving annual. It has highly aromatic leaves which have a pleasant spicy odor and taste somewhat like anise or cloves. Both the leaves and their essential oils are used as flavoring agents. There are many different types of sweet basil—large and dwarf forms, with green, purple, or variegated leaves. Many of these widely-grown plants are ornamental as well as edible.

Like many herbs, basil has many reputed medicinal properties, such as the ability to draw out poison from insect bites or use as a sedative, or for treating digestive disorders, soothing pain, promoting perspiration, and promoting the production of breast milk in nursing mothers.

Today, basil is an important plant of Mediterranean cuisine, and is especially praised in both French and Italian cooking. The French call basil the “royal plant” (*l'herbe royale*) and there is a good reason for that. According to research, the scent of basil has a salutary effect on people's disposition and outlook. Brewed into a tea, basil is great for the gastrointestinal tract as it can relieve gas and even combat dysentery. Just like mint, the basil's closest relative, it is easy to cultivate in a garden or in a pot at home. And, of course, it has a pleasant and unique taste, which makes it an indispensable ingredient for the preparation of many dishes. Basil goes especially well with tomato, fish and meat dishes.

Basil is easily grown from seed or it can be purchased as small potted plants. Plant seeds early in the spring, sowing the seed at a one-half-inch depth. They can be sown directly in the ground after all danger of frost has passed or they can be started indoors four to six weeks before setting out for earlier harvest. Use two to three seeds per pot. Germination can occur in five to seven days, but will take longer under cool conditions.

Basil is a warm season plant, requiring temperatures above 50 degrees to grow, but does best when temperatures are in the 80s and 90s. Plant basil in full sun, 12 to 15 inches apart, in well-drained soil. Water adequately to produce tender leaves, but be careful not to overwater. Basil needs more fertilizer than most herbs. Incorporate compost before planting or top dress at planting to keep the plants producing leaves all season.

Thanks to Bonnie Compton for this report on basil.