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Planting an Herb Garden & Orzo & Grilled Asparagus Salad

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In spite of the miserable weather, Memorial Day Weekend was the unofficial start to summer. Thinking positively and rapping sharply on any and all wood, the snow and freezing rain must surely be behind us. We are past due for sunny skies and warm, gentle showers. With fingers crossed and an optimistic heart, it's time to plant your herb garden. Herbs will make a lovely addition to your garden and your kitchen. Fresh herbs add a bit of spark to spring and summer dishes.

But what to plant? With so many choices a trip to the nursery can be daunting. For starters, you can't miss with parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. (Simon and Garfunkel would be proud.) You'll also want to add some basil, lots of basil, as well as chives and mint ... and maybe some chervil or tarragon, dill, cilantro and oregano. French Tarragon is one of my favorites. Its lovely anise flavor is wonderful with poultry and fish or whisked into a creamy Béarnaise Sauce and served with a perfectly grilled steak. On the other hand, pungent oregano is wonderful in Greek and Italian food.

Of course there are variations, sisters, half-brothers and cousins of all these herbs from pineapple sage to Thai basil and chocolate mint. Before you know it, you'll need another acre! While you are at it, don't forget to plant a border of lavender.

What to know before you start. Planting herbs is all about location, location, location. If you are lucky, you have the perfect spot right outside your kitchen door. Most herbs need a daily dose of six or more hours of sun so you may need to sacrifice convenience if your kitchen faces north like mine.

Next, like most plants you'll need good, well drained, fertile soil for your herbs to flourish. Before you plant, amend your soil with compost. After planting, add a layer of mulch like shredded bark to help keep the soil moist and weed-free.

In the ground or in pots? I always feel more than a twinge of envy when one of those celebrity kitchen divas gives a tour of her herb garden. Without a weed or dead leaf in sight, their perfect beds could easily be mistaken for the kitchen garden at Versailles. Not to mention that they have enough lush plants to season the entire state of New Hampshire and maybe a bit of Vermont.

Although it's been difficult, I've somehow managed to rein in my green-eyed monster. Instead of an expansive, perfectly manicured garden, my herbs live in an eclectic collection of pots. Some large, some very large, they bask in a sunny spot in the corner of my driveway.

Flowerpots are ideal in our short growing season. I love picking fresh sage, thyme and rosemary year-round so as soon as fall nights turn frosty, I move the pots into the garage. They spend the winter in 40 degree comfort and get just enough light to stay green. A sunny three season porch is ideal but mine collapsed several years ago under record snows. The porch was like a sauna in the summer so I replaced it with a nice airy screened porch. The new porch is wonderful on a hot afternoon but not-at-all-wonderful for wintering plants.

A note of caution! Even if you decide to plant your herbs in the garden, keep your mint and oregano in pots. Otherwise they will soon take over the rest of your garden, your neighbor's yard and the field across the road.

Where ever and whatever you plant, enjoy your herb garden and bon appétit!

Salsa Verde

This versatile sauce is great with your favorite grilled meat, fish or poultry. Experiment with herbs until you find your favorite combination. Enjoy!

Serves 6-8

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
Zest and juice of 1 lemon
1 teaspoon anchovy paste
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
1/4 teaspoon or to taste chili pepper flakes
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
1/2 cup or to taste extra-virgin olive oil
1 small red onion, finely chopped
3 garlic cloves, minced
2 tablespoons capers, drained



About 1 1/2 cups herbs:

1 cup loosely packed flat-leaf parsley leaves
1/2 cup loosely packed tarragon leaves
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

or

1 cup loosely packed flat-leaf parsley leaves
1/4 cup loosely packed fresh oregano
1/4 cup loosely packed fresh mint
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

Put the vinegar, lemon juice, anchovy paste and mustard in a bowl, season with the chili pepper flakes, salt and pepper and whisk to combine. Add the olive oil and whisk again. Stir in the onion and garlic, cover and marinate for 20-30 minutes.

Put the olive oil mixture in the bowl of a food processor, add the herbs, capers and lemon zest and pulse to chop and combine. Add more olive oil and process until the sauce reaches the desired consistency. Season with salt and pepper, cover and let sit for 10-20 minutes before serving.

Can be made ahead, covered and stored in the refrigerator for up to 1 day.