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HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR

Old-fashioned Herbs - How to Grow and Use them

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U. S. Department of Agriculture

A dialogue between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, October 8, 1936.

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MR. SALISBURY: Even if the World Series is over, the season for double headers hasn't closed. Today we're sending you as part of the Department of Agriculture program a double header led by two of your good friends - Ruth Van Deman and W. R. Beattie. They tell me this is going to be an old-fashioned kitchen garden program. And didn't you say something, Ruth, about it being by special request?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, Mr. Beattie and I have been getting letters from some of our listeners asking us to talk about old-fashioned herbs. Here's one letter from Coral Gables, Florida, and here's another from Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. There seems to be a regular revival of interest in herb gardens and in using these old-fashioned seasonings in cooking. It seems to be sweeping the whole country. What do you think started it, Mr. Beattie?

MR. BEATTIE: Hard to say what started it. Gardening, like everything else, seems to go in cycles. Anyway, I think the cottage herb garden up at the Washington Cathedral has had a lot to do in spreading the interest in these aromatic plants. Didn't they tell us up there the other day that they had some 300,000 visitors a year? And they come from every state in the Union.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, they said they have a constant stream of people visiting the Bishop's garden and stopping to sniff the sage, and the rosemary, and the lemon verbena, and all the rest growing there in the little herb garden. It's amazing the number of kinds they have in that small space. It seems to be true what Henry Beston said "A garden of herbs need be no larger than the shadow of a bush."

MR. BEATTIE: Quite true. You can grow all the herbs the average family wants for seasoning purposes in a few square feet of garden space. The creeping plants like thyme and winter savory will even flourish in the crevices of a sunny wall. You remember the winter savory we saw the other day on the stone wall up at the Cathedral garden.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Indeed I do. I remember the way the warm sun brought out the fragrance. The leaves and tender twigs from one of those savory plants would be enough to season the stuffing for dozens of roast turkeys and chickens. When herbs are fresh it takes only a pinch or two to flavor a stuffing, or a soup, or a stew. To me that's the beauty of having herbs growing in your own garden or even in a window box indoors in winter. Then you have them to use fresh before the volatile oils that give them their spicy, aromatic flavor have a chance to escape.

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MR. BEATTIE: That's true even of the kinds that are dried and cured and stored. Then there are some kinds like chives and mint that are best when used fresh.

Now, on the gardening side, with the exception of tarragon and one or two others, there's nothing difficult about growing herbs or very different in their culture from that of other garden plants. Some are annuals. But most are either perennials or biennials. And because the plants are going to stay in the same spot for year after year, it is important that the soil be well-prepared beforehand.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well, what are the special points about preparing the soil for an herb garden?

MR. BEATTIE: First spread a liberal dressing of bonemeal over the surface, then spade or fork the soil to a depth of 8 or 10 inches -- the deeper the better. I wouldn't advise the addition of manure to the ground although manure applied a year in advance of planting the herbs would be all right.

As for the seeds to start with, quite a number of the seed houses carry a pretty full line of herb seeds. The seeds of a number of the herbs do not keep well so it is essential to get good fresh seeds. Seeds of several of the herbs can be saved at home after you once get started. This is especially true of the annuals.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Now, Mr. Beattie, shall we begin and run right down the herb alphabet. On my list A stands for anise.

MR. BEATTIE: All right. Anise is an annual. You simply sow the seeds as you would for carrots. In fact, anise belongs to the same family of plants as carrots. When the plants are well started, thin them to about 12 to 18 inches apart in the rows. About midsummer when the plants are two feet or so high, they will blossom and form seed heads. Before the seeds begin to shatter, cut off the seed heads, spread them on paper or cloth, and dry them in the shade. Then rub out the seeds and blow off the chaff, and store the seeds in thin cloth bags, not paper bags. Anise seeds need plenty of air to keep them from heating and becoming rancid. And there you have the anise seeds ready to use.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well, anise seed is an old-time favorite for flavoring candies and cakes and bread. Sometimes the seeds are stirred into the bread dough, especially in making rye bread, or they may be mixed with salt and sprinkled on the top of rolls. Anise seeds are used just about like caraway seeds.

MR. BEATTIE: That's reasonable. Caraway is a close relative of anise. It's grown in practically the same way, except that it is a biennial and does not produce its seed until the second season. In the colder sections of the country it may be necessary to protect the caraway plants over winter.

MISS VAN DEMAN: We're getting a little ahead of ourselves alphabetically, Mr. Beattie, but while we're on caraway, I want to put in a good word for that Norwegian way of seasoning sauerkraut with caraway seeds. They heat the sauerkraut in butter or some other fat, and stir in the caraway seeds, and let the sauerkraut cook slowly for 15 or 20 minutes. The result is a very delicious blend of flavors, a great improvement on either caraway or sauerkraut alone, I

think. Also, lots of people like caraway seeds stirred into their cottage cheese or cream cheese to give it more flavor.

Now, getting back into our alphabetical stride, I think basil comes next. That's rather easy to grow, isn't it?

MR. BEATTIE: Yes, basil is very easy to grow, and sturdy, and attractive enough to sow along in a border with flowering annuals. Also, it will hold up in the house in the winter as a potted plant. The leaves and tender tips of basil can be used fresh, or the stalks can be cut off when they are in bloom and tied in small bunches and hung up to dry in the shade. Basil has an odor and flavor that reminds some people of bay leaf.

MISS VAN DEMAN: That's what makes it such a good flavoring for tomatoes. A few of the fresh basil leaves cut up in a tomato salad give it a very delightful flavor. And you can use either the fresh or the dried in tomato soup or in giving a different and interesting taste to an old standby like stewed or scalloped tomatoes. Or if you put a little basil in the tomato sauce for macaroni or spaghetti, somebody will be sure to ask you for your new recipe.

Now for the C's, Mr. Beattie, what about celery and chives? Or do you class celery with the herbs?

MR. BEATTIE: Well, Miss Van Deman, celery is really an important vegetable crop, but a few celery plants in a corner of the herb garden are fine to have, because you can cut the tender stems and leaves all summer long, and use them just as you do the tops from celery stalks. Celery is a little difficult to grow. It needs a rich soil and plenty of moisture. Celery seed is of course very widely used for flavoring, but it can be bought very cheaply, and I wouldn't recommend trying to raise it in the herb garden.

Now chives are quite a different story. They belong to the onion family. The plants grow only 6 or 8 inches tall, and at certain seasons they have very attractive, violet-colored clusters of bloom. Chives also need rich soil, and they are propagated by dividing the clumps of bulbs either in the fall or early spring. Cutting the leaves for flavoring purposes does not injure the plants. New ones soon grow again. Many people like to keep a pot of chives on the kitchen window sill all winter, and clip off the leaves for salads.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, and for sandwiches. A few little green chives chopped fine are very good in meat or cheese sandwiches, or mixed with butter to make a sandwich spread. And chopped chives on hot broiled steak with melted butter over all make a combination fit for the gourmet. There's a restaurant in New York famous for its minute steaks. The dressing of chives and butter is the real secret, I've found. Chives give just that soupcon -- that suspicion of onion flavor the French chefs are always talking about.

Now garlic, it's as much stronger than ordinary onion as chives are milder. A mere rub of the salad bowl with the cut surface of a clove of garlic gives enough of that pungent flavor to suit me. But strictly speaking, maybe garlic doesn't belong among the herbs either. How about that, Mr. Beattie?

MR. BEATTIE: That's an open question. The true garlic is rather hard to grow -- harder than either chives or onions, and I wouldn't bother with it in an herb garden. I'd rather use my space for something like dill, which, as everybody knows, is the popular flavoring herb for cucumber pickles. But not everybody seems to know that it can also be used fresh as a seasoning.

MISS VAN DEMAN: You must have been talking to Miss Miriam Birdseye. She's very enthusiastic about fresh dill leaves as a seasoning.

But, Mr. Beattie, I'm afraid we've taken on a larger order here than we can handle. Our time's about up, and we're not halfway down the herb alphabet.

MR. BEATTIE: Well what do you say to our signing off now and saving the rest for next week?

MISS VAN DEMAN: That's a good idea. Since our trip out to the herb garden at the Cathedral the other day, I'm that herb-conscious I don't want to slight a single one. Some of these little plants are so modest and unassuming that you don't know how fragrant and useful they are until you begin to handle them and study them.

MR. SALISBURY: All right, Miss Van Deman and Mr. Beattie. We'll schedule another double header for you next Wednesday so you can give us more of this interesting information about growing and using garden herbs.