Cultivating herbs has been practiced for millennia. Many native herbs have been gathered in our Appalachian region, but MOST residents would now like to combine native harvesting and cultivating skills for a greater selection of herbs for seasoning and medicinal remedies. While we favor using native plants for these purposes, we realize that people would like to experience a variety of native and non-native plants, provided the non-natives will not escape and become invasive.

ASPI has grown herbs from the beginning, but mostly for use by residents on the property and by interested parties. A formal “perennial” garden with a dozen rock-lined beds has existed since 1993 at the demonstration center. The particular varieties we have grown and used include: basil, chamomile, chives, comfrey (a member of the borage family), dill, horseradish, mint varieties, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, wild strawberry, and thyme. Others listed below are being introduced.

Criteria Used for Selecting the Herb Species

- Ease of cultivating: herbs that do not require tilling of the soil each year or many soil amendments.
- Ease of storage and transportation: herbs that can be easily dehydrated and good to use in that form.
- Hardiness: plants that would not require transplanting to greenhouses and cold frames over winter.
- Popularity: herbs for which a market or potential market exists.
- Safety: plants without toxic parts.
- Usefulness: herbs used in teas or having culinary value.

Features of the Thirty-Four Species of Favorite Herbs

Agrimony **Agrimonia eupatoria**
- easily started from seed
- will self-seed
- sweet scent
- mild tea
  - Nichols (seeds (s))

Angelica **Angelica archangelica**
- candy stems for decorating desserts
- heavy producer per square foot
  - Nichols (s) (plants (p))

Bee balm, white **Monarda clinopodia**

Anise **Pimpinella anisum**
- easy to care for
- licorice flavored leaves and seeds
  - Liberty; - Nichols

Basil **Ocimum basilicum**
- popular culinary herb
- grows easily from seed
  - Durhams (p)
  - Liberty
  - Nichols; - Peaceful Valley
Bergamot, wild *Monarda fistulosa*
herb native to Kentucky
easy to grow
makes a fragrant tea
(grows in area)
- Nichols

Betony *Stachys officinalis*
leaves are a substitute for black tea
beautiful purple spikes
needs little care

Borage *Borago officinalis*
crisp cucumber flavor
stems used like celery
blue star-shaped blossoms
can be candied or eaten fresh
good companion plant
grows easily from seed, readily reseeds
- Liberty; - Nichols

Caraway *Carum carvi*
easily cultivated from seed
eye part of plant edible
- Nichols; - Park

Catnip *Nepeta cataria*
sturdy plant
- Liberty
- Nichols
(s) (p)
- Park

Chamomile *Chamaemelum nobile*
good low-growing ground cover
this species of chamomile
is a short perennial
grows in almost any type of soil
good companion plant
extremely hardy
- Nichols (German Chamomile); - Park

Chives

Coriander *Coriandrum sativum*

Costmary *Chrysanthemum balsamita*
easily-spreading perennial
short drying time
stores well for long periods of time
- Nichols

Dill *Anethum graveolens*
popular herb
companion plant
- Durhams (plants); Liberty Seed Company
- Nichols; - Park
- Peaceful Valley

Dittany *Cunila origanoides*
herb native to Kentucky

Fenugreek *Trigonella foenum-graecum*
one of the oldest and most widely used herbs
makes an imitation maple syrup
easy to grow
rarely bothered by pests and disease
- Nichols

Ginger, wild *Asarum canadense*
local plant
strong ginger flavor
- Nichols

Horehound *Marrubium vulgare*
hardy perennial
grows easily
needs little water
- Nichols (s) (p)
- Park

Horseradish *Armoracia lapathifolia*
 perennial
grows easily
winter gathering
- Park

Comfrey

hardy perennial
good for ornamental purposes
(purple flower)
leaves used for exterior inflammation
fast growing and used for green manure

- Liberty; - Nichols
- Park; - Peaceful Valley

Herb native to Kentucky
easy to grow
makes a fragrant tea
Hyssop *Agastache foeniculum*
- good economic potential
- produces well
- easy to harvest and dry
- makes a fine tea with a familiar, much-enjoyed flavor
  - Nichols (s) (p)

Lemon balm *Melissa officinalis*
- attracts bees
- grows easily from seed
- easy and plentiful harvesting
  (possibly 3 cuttings per season)
  - Nichols; - Liberty

Lovage, black *Smyrnium olusatrum*
- celery substitute
- an important food in the first century
- simpler to grow
- dies back each winter and returns
- stronger the following summer
  - Nichols

Mint *Mentha* spp.
- tough plant
- harvestable when it first comes up in spring
- multitude of uses
  - Park; - Liberty

Mint, mountain *Pycnanthemum incanum*
- herb native to Kentucky

Oregano *Origanum* spp.
- popular perennial herb
- harvestable when plant reaches 6 “ in height
  - Nichols; - Park; - Liberty

Parsley *Petroselinum crispum*
- popular herb and garnish
- highly nutritious
  - Nichols; - Liberty
  - Park
  - Peaceful Valley

Rosemary *Rosmarinus officinalis*
- popular perennial herb
- attracts bees
- harvesting can be done any time during the year
- heavy producer per square foot
  - Liberty
  - Nichols Seeds (p)
  - Park
Sage  *Salvia officinalis*
- Holt’s Mammoth variety grows rapidly
good for cutting and
drying bulk quantities
quick to germinate
hardy perennial
2 or 3 harvests a year are
possible once established
good companion plant
- Liberty
- Nichols
- Park

Savory  *Satureja montana*
- popular herb
easy to grow from seed or cuttings
- Nichols (p)
- Park

Strawberry, wild  *Fragaria virginiana*
- native to Kentucky
- leaves used in tea
- Sandy Mush (p)

Thyme  *Thymus vulgaris*
- popular perennial herb
- attractive to bees
- good companion plant
- requires little care
does well in poor soil
- Nichols (s) (p)
- Park (p)

Wintergreen  *Gaultheria procumbens*
- herb native to Kentucky
- grows well in partial shade
- Sandy Mush (p)

**Garden Layout Considerations**

Planting perennials in separate beds from annuals that require yearly replanting.

Isolating rampant growers such as mints from other plants.

Planting groups of a given herb together.

Planting in descending order of plant height, with the tallest plants on the north side of the bed.

Matching the soil and sunlight conditions of each bed to the needs of the individual types of herbs.
Keeping beds no more than four feet across for easy tending and least soil compaction.

Taking advantage of companion plant relationships.

Designing layout according to aesthetics of plant shape, texture, and blossoms.

Creating a special section devoted to herbs native to Kentucky.

**Perennial and Other Herb Advantages**

- Perennial herbs do not require plowing and replanting each year and thus result in less need for labor in cultivation and less soil erosion and nutrient depletion.

- Being closer genetically to wild plants, herbs are more resistant to insects and diseases; some even repel or discourage insect pests.

- When well established these provide their own weed control.

- The propagation, planting, and care of herb plants are not easily automated, so small farmers are not threatened by large agribusinesses in these areas. In addition, the processing of herbs largely necessitates hand labor, which can create jobs through local cottage industries.

- Perennial herbs require less water and fewer nutrients than conventional crops.

- Synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and insecticides cannot be used on plants grown for medicinal purposes. Small farmers are not threatened by large agribusinesses in the domain of herb-growing.

- The processing of herbs largely necessitates hand labor. This can create jobs through local cottage industries. Products well-suited for this include:

  - herbal vinegars and salad dressings
  - dried culinary herbs and seasoning mixes
  - herbal tea mixes
  - candied or crystallized herbs
  - herbal salves
  - air fresheners
  - essential oils
  - scented candles or soaps
  - catnip toys
  - insect repellents

**Marketing**

Herbal teas sales are some of the fastest growing commodities in supermarket history. The market for herbs that were locally-grown increased at an even faster rate and that pace has not slackened in recent years. However, the U.S. still imports far larger amounts of herbs and spices than it exports. In an age when alternative crops are sought for tobacco farmers and others, herb gardening seems quite promising.

Similar to ginseng-growing, a somewhat less difficult obstacle to new herb growers is the two-year period most perennial herbs require before harvesting can begin. The marketing machinery is not in place to guarantee
the future market as it is with other perennial crops such as fruit, and therefore normal financing is not available. Another disadvantage is the lack of information available relative to more traditional crops.

Types of marketing for the small farmer to consider, include: direct marketing at roadside stands, u-pick (not recommended in most herb growing areas due to damage), farmer’s market, peddling (quite time consuming), local store or gift shop, natural foods store or co-op, or local restaurants. Bulk marketing could include 500 pound-minimum buyer, 5000 pound-minimum buyer and import-export houses.

Sources

Nichols Garden Nursery  1-800-422-3985
Liberty Seed Company  1-800-541-6022, (330) 364-1611
Park Seed  1-800-845-3369
Sandy Mush Herb Nursery  (704) 683-2014
Peaceful Valley Supply  (916) 272-4769

References