Fresh herbs can add a special touch to your meals. But if you factor in the cost of those little plastic boxes of herbs from the store, you might add a cost of $7 to $9 to the supper. Herbs are easy to grow and a real cost saver. At $2.50 for a package of seeds (200 to 700 seeds, depending on the herb), you can grow a full garden box of herbs for about the same price as the cost of a package of fresh herbs from the store.

Here at Cooperative Extension Service, our expert in growing herbs is Taylor Maida. She is a great resource for all questions related to growing plants. Some herbs that grow well in the Interior include oregano, marjoram, sage, pineapple sage, anise hyssop, French tarragon, lemon balm, parsley, mints, catnip, shiso or perilla, chives, and dill. Basil needs a warm spot to flourish, such as a warm porch or greenhouse.

Herbs can be grown in the ground or, as many of do here in Alaska, in containers, window boxes or hanging baskets. Recycled containers are easy to use for herbs. I saw a great idea in a magazine recently. They used an old recycled shoe organizer (one of the kind that hangs on the closet door) and planted an herb plant in each of the little pouches. It was hung up on the wall, providing a great vertical way to grow plants.

Herbs are easy to grow, but you must select the proper location to grow them. Most herbs need a sunny, warm location. The oils, which account for the herbs’ flavor, are produced in the greatest quantity when plants receive six to eight hours of full sunlight each day. If you don’t have a good, sunny location, many herbs will tolerate light shade. However, their growth and quality will not be as good.

Nearly all herbs can be grown from seed. If possible, sow seeds in shallow boxes. A light, well-drained soil is best for starting the seedlings. When planting, mix two parts sterilized potting soil and one part coarse sand or perlite, or purchase a seed-starting mix. There should be a hole in the bottom of each pot to ensure good drainage.
Be careful not to cover the seeds too deeply with soil. Generally, the finer the seed, the shallower it should be sown. As a general rule, sow seeds at a depth of twice their diameter. Remember, you can always refer to the back of the seed packet for recommended planting depth.

Transplant seedlings into the ground in early June, or into a larger pot for the summer.

Consider the water needs of each herb. Plants that grow rapidly need more water, as do plants in clay pots or hanging baskets. Misting and grouping the plants on a tray of moistened pebbles will help keep them in a humid condition. Don't drench herbs. Avoid getting herb roots soggy by allowing them to sit in a saucer of water. Water well, so a little water runs through the pot, but does not accumulate. Allow moderate drying, but not wilting, between waterings.

Fresh leaves may be picked as soon as the plant has enough foliage to maintain growth. To ensure good oil content, pick leaves or seeds after dew has disappeared, but before the sun becomes too hot.

If you are drying the herb, harvest leaves before the flower buds open. Pick the seed heads as the color changes from green to brown or gray. Wash dirty leaves and seed heads in cool water; drain thoroughly before drying.

Herbs are a great way to add flavor to your meals. Growing your own herbs is a great way to save money. If you have questions on how to grow herbs — or how to preserve them later in the year — give us a yell at Extension at 907-474-2450. We’ll be glad to help.

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