

Basil is the fragrant king of herbs

Basil is the fragrant king of herbs CORVALLIS, OR - Sweet basil. Its scientific name (*Ocimum basilicum*) means "fragrant king," and many would agree it is the king of herbs. Basil is as beautiful as it is useful. Foliage colors range from pale green to emerald, vivid purple and purple laced with gold. Texture varies from silky and shiny to crinkled and matte. Brush against its foliage or crush a leaf, and basil releases a wonderfully spicy fragrance. Varieties include cinnamon, lemon and anise. A member of the mint family, basil has the familiar four-sided stems and whorled flowers, but is more refined in its growth, as befits a king. Basil is native to the warm parts of India and Asia, where it has been cultivated as a perennial for thousands of years. In Oregon, it grows as an annual. Ross Penhallegon, horticulturist with the Oregon State University Extension Service, offers some advice about growing this king of herbs. Start basil in flats or wait until the soil temperature is consistently above 50 degrees, then plant basil seed directly into a well-worked, composted garden bed. Cover seeds with fine soil, no deeper than one-eighth of an inch. Gently tamp down soil over seeds and water with a fine spray. Seeds should germinate in one to two weeks. Keep the soil moist, as these warm spring days can dry soil out in a jiffy. Young basil seedlings wither easily in the hot sun. Provide shade for them the first week after emergence. Thin seedlings by cutting unwanted plants off at the soil surface with scissors. Basil plants should eventually be planted 12 to 18 inches apart. After seedlings are about six inches high, pinch off the tops for bushier plants. Basil leaves can be harvested off the plants periodically throughout the summer. Water and fertilize your basil plants frequently. Pinch off the flowers to keep the plant from setting seed. Many varieties of basil seed and transplants are available from nurseries and seed catalogs. Italian varieties including "Napoleatano" or "Genovese" are favorites for pesto. Cinnamon- and clove-scented varieties are good for seasoning vegetable dishes. Dwarf basil, including Greek basil, are excellent varieties for planters and window sill gardening and make great summer garnishes. African basil is a soft perennial which can be grown in a greenhouse almost year long. Thai basil is especially delicious in Far East cooking, rice dishes and with fish. Spicy purple basil dress up vinegars or leafy salads. Basil can dress up a garden as well as a dish. It will blend with colorful lettuce, and really grow well on the edge of a bed of tomatoes. Combine it with annuals, such as dwarf snapdragons, and French marigolds. The dwarf basil 'Spicy Globe' makes a wonderful mounded edging, where the chance brush of a hand will fill the garden with spicy scent. By: Peg Herring Source: Ross Penhallegon

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