Growing and Using Basil

Basil, *Ocimum basilicum*, is a member of the mint family and a popular annual herb. Basil plants can grow up to two feet in height. Both leaves and stems are used fresh and dry. Leaves are normally green but several cultivars have burgundy or purple leaves. Flowers range from white to shades of pink and purple, and appear from late July into August.

**History**
The name basil is thought to be derived from the Greek work *basilikon*, meaning royal or king. It is often referred to as the “king of the herbs.” Basil’s derivation also may have come from the Latin word *basiliscus*, which refers to basilisk, a mythical fire-breathing dragon. According to Roman legend, basil is an antidote to the venom of the basilisk. *Ocimum* (the botanical name for basil) is derived from a Greek word meaning to be fragrant.

Basil has a long history of use in ornamental gardens, herbal remedies, and recipes, including vinegars and teas. Basil has been used in Asian cuisine for thousands of years. In India, Hindus believed that a leaf of basil buried with them would serve as their passport to heaven. It also was considered sacred to the gods Krishna and Vishnu in India.

In the early 1600s the English used basil in their food and in doorways to ward off uninvited pests, such as flies, as well as evil spirits. Basil also was worn by young Englishmen to signal serious intentions when courting a woman. In the 1800s, Europeans and Americans used it as a mild sedative by adding leaves to bath water, teas, and massage oils.

**Uses**
Although basil is most commonly associated with Italian food, it is used throughout the world. Fresh or dried leaves can be used in soups, stews, sauces, salads, vegetables and meat, fish and egg dishes. The leaves are used to flavor vinegars, teas and oils.

Basil blends well with tomatoes and is used to season pizza, spaghetti sauce, sausage, soup, tomato juice, dressings, salads and, of course, pesto. Basil is the prime ingredient in pesto, in which it is blended with pine nuts, oil and cheese. Some Italian cooks prefer its use over oregano. While basil is included in many peppery main dishes, it also is used in fresh fruit desserts.

Purple basil is best used fresh in salads and for making flavored vinegar. In the garden, purple basil is an attractive, colorful contrast with other annuals and perennials. Stems of both purple and green basils are attractive additions to flower arrangements.

Scented basils, such as cinnamon and lemon, add a distinctive touch to special dishes with their delicate overtone flavors. They can be used for making jellies, jams, vinegars, and sorbets.

**Culture**
Basil performs best when grown outdoors in the garden. Plants prefer full sun and a well-drained soil. The planting site should receive at least six hours of direct sun each day.
Basil plantings can be established by buying plants from a greenhouse or garden center, starting seeds indoors, or by direct seeding outdoors. Basil can also be grown outdoors in containers. If outdoor locations are unavailable, basil can be grown indoors in a sunny window. Plants grown indoors will have a less intense flavor and fragrance.

When sowing seed outdoors, wait until night temperatures are consistently above 50°F. Sow the seeds in a shallow, 1/4-inch-deep furrow. Space rows two feet apart. After germination, thin seedlings so plants are 12 inches apart. Basil takes 70-80 days to reach maturity.

When starting basil indoors, sow seeds about six weeks before the average last frost. Cover the seeds lightly with a germination medium. Keep the medium warm (70°F) and moist. Upon germination, immediately place seedlings under fluorescent lights or in a sunny window. Seedlings are very sensitive to low moisture and cool temperatures. Transplant the seedlings when the first true leaves appear.

Basil is frost sensitive and easily damaged by late spring frosts. Plant basil outdoors after the danger of frost has past. Plants grow rapidly during the warm weather of summer.

Repeated harvest of foliage often requires a light application of a complete garden fertilizer early in the growing season. Avoid over fertilization as it will result in poor flavor and fragrance. While established basil is relatively drought tolerant, regular watering in dry weather promotes plant growth.

Harvest

For maximum flavor, basil should be harvested when flower buds have started to form but before they begin to open. When harvesting for vinegars, wait until the plants are blooming. The white to purple flowers add color to the vinegar. Much of the flavor in the leaves will have dissipated once seed has formed.

Choose a dry day for harvesting basil. Gather the leaves in the morning after the dew has dried, but before the temperature rises.

Preservation

Drying herbs on racks or trays is preferred over tying them in bunches and hanging them to dry. Cover the racks or trays of basil with a sheet of cheesecloth to keep off dust, then put in a warm, well-ventilated place out of the sun for about 24 hours. When the drying process is completed, basil should be thoroughly dry and brittle, but will retain its green or purple coloring. If the leaves are brown, they became too hot during the drying process, and much of the flavor is lost. Basil also can be dried in a commercial food dehydrator or microwave oven.

Transfer the dried basil leaves to airtight jars as soon as possible. The dried basil must not come in contact with any moisture or it will rehydrate and become musty. Use small, dark jars and seal tightly. If the jars are clear, they must be kept in a dark place, since light will cause fading and flavor deterioration. Dried herbs can be stored in small, tightly-sealed plastic bags or in a closed container.

Basil also can be preserved by freezing. Put the leaves in small plastic bags or wrap in small packets of plastic wrap. The leaves also can be chopped, mixed with water, put into ice cube trays and frozen.

Meet the basil family

The basil family includes about 150 species from Asia, Africa, and South America. Here are a few cultivars.

‘African Blue’ ‘Fine Green’ ‘Mrs Burns Lemon’
‘Amethyst’ ‘Genovese’ ‘Napoletona’
‘Anise’ ‘Green Ruffles’ ‘Nufar’
‘Aromatto’ ‘Italian Large Leaf’ ‘Purple Ruffles’
‘Cardinal’ ‘Lime’ ‘Pluto’
‘Cinnamon’ ‘Lime’ ‘Red Rubin’
‘Clove’ ‘Magical Michael’ ‘Siam Queen’
‘Dark Opal’ ‘Mammoth’ ‘Sweet Dani’
‘Elidia’ ‘Minimum’ ‘Thai’ or ‘Sweet Thai’

Revised by Cindy Haynes and Richard Jauron, extension horticulturists. Originally prepared by Gina Pflasterer, former student; and Linda Naeve, extension specialist; Iowa State University.

Photos by Cindy Haynes.