

## Meet the basil family

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

*Ocimum basilicum* (Sweet basil)

'African Blue'	'Licorice'
'Anise'	'Magical Michael'
'Cinnamon'	'Mammoth'
'Clove'	'Minimum'
'Dark Opal'	'Napoletano'
'Fine Green'	'Purple Ruffles'
'Genovese'	'Siam Queen'
'Green Ruffles'	'Sweet Dani'
'Italian Large Leaf'	'Thai'

*Ocimum gratissimum* (East Indian basil)

*Ocimum basilicum* var. *citriodorum* (Lemon basil)

*Ocimum basilicum* var. *crispum* (Curly basil)  
'Leaf lettuce'

*Ocimum basilicum* var. *minimum* (Greek basil)  
'Spicy Globe'

*Ocimum sanctum* (Holy or sacred basil)

is completed, basil should be thoroughly dry and brittle, but still retain its green or purple coloring. If the leaves are brown, they became too hot during the drying process, and all flavor is gone. Basil also can be dried in a commercial food dehydrator or microwave oven. Check your owners' manual for details.

Transfer the dried basil leaves to airtight jars as soon as possible. They must not come in contact with any moisture or they will re-absorb it 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 also may be stored in small tightly sealed plastic bags 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.

Another preservation method for basil uses salt. The leaves should be laid in a wide-necked jar or plastic box and covered with coarse salt. Alternate the basil and salt layers until the container is completely filled. Pour olive oil over the layers and seal tightly. Keep the container in the refrigerator for several weeks. The oil, as well as the basil, can be used.

## For more information

Contact your local ISU Extension office or visit one of these Web sites:

ISU Extension Extension Distribution Center  
[www.extension.iastate.edu/store](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/store)

ISU Horticulture  
[www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu](http://www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu)

Reiman Gardens  
[www.reimangardens.iastate.edu](http://www.reimangardens.iastate.edu)

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# Growing and Using Basil



Basil, *Ocimum basilicum*, is a member of the mint family with an aroma like mint and tea. Both leaves and stems are used fresh and dry. Basil is an annual that grows 1 to 2 feet in height. Its flowers range from white to shades of pink and purple, and appear from late July into August.

Although basil is most commonly associated with Italian foods, it is used throughout the world. Basil has a long history of use in ornamental gardens, herbal remedies, and recipes, including vinegars and teas.

## History

The name “basil” is thought to be derived from the Greek word *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 referred to the 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 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

Basil has culinary and ornamental value. Fresh or dried leaves can be used in soups, stews, and sauces; meat, fish, and egg dishes; salads; and vegetables. The leaves are used in flavored vinegars and teas. They also can be steeped in oil to produce flavored oils.

Purple basil is best used fresh in salads and for making flavored vinegar. In the garden, purple basil is a colorful contrast in annual beds and is useful in flower arrangements.

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

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.

## Culture

Although basil can be grown indoors on a sunny window sill, garden-grown plants have a much more distinct flavor and fragrance. Basil prefers full sun. Continued removal of foliage requires a light application of a complete analysis garden fertilizer, such as 5-10-5, early in the growing season. However, too much fertilizer will result in poor flavor and fragrance.

Basil plantings can be established by buying plants from a greenhouse or garden center, starting seeds indoors, or direct seeding outdoors.

When sowing seed outdoors, don’t plant too early. Wait until night temperatures are consistently above 50°F. Sow the seeds in a shallow, ¼-inch-deep furrow. After germination, thin to about 12 inches between plants. Space rows 2 feet apart. Basil takes 70 to 80 days to reach maturity.

When starting basil indoors, sow seeds about six weeks before the average last frost. Cover the seeds lightly with growing medium. Keep the medium warm (70°F) and moist. Seedlings are very sensitive to low moisture and cool temperatures. Transplant the seedlings when the first true leaves appear. When transplanting, lift plants carefully by the leaves, not the stem. Set plants outdoors after the danger of frost is past.

All basil is frost sensitive. Once hot weather sets in, they will grow quickly. However, if the plants get chilled early in the season, they will never grow well. Purple basil is more susceptible than other varieties to stresses in the early stages of 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