

Create a Herb Spiral Tipsheet 50p



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A spiral is a compact, efficient and attractive way to make sure you've always got a variety of fresh, tasty herbs. This tipsheet shows you how to make one.

Do your herbs languish forgotten at the bottom of the garden, out of sight, out of mind? Or perhaps there doesn't appear to be the space or conditions to accommodate all your favourite herbs? The solution is to create a herb spiral right next to the kitchen door.

A herb spiral is as simple as it sounds: a large spiral structure, typically measuring 1.5-2 metres wide at the diameter, spiralling up to a height of 1-1.5 metres, with a planting path running up it (see diagram). A herb spiral of these proportions is big enough to accommodate at least all of the basic culinary herbs, and a few exotic ones too.

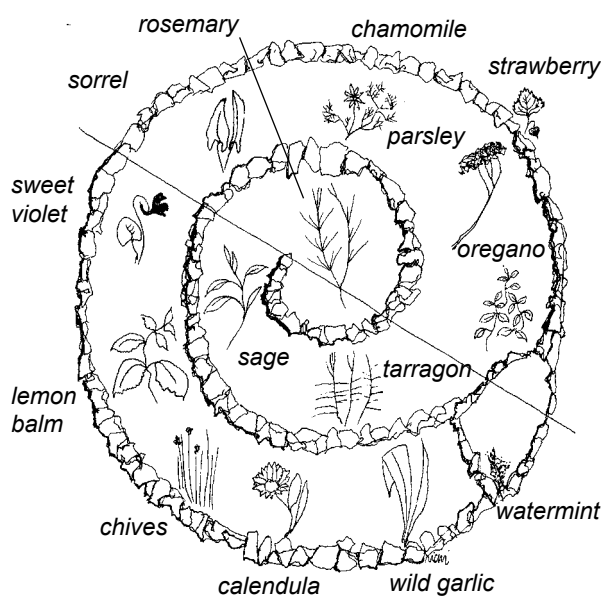
Why a spiral?

There are many advantages of creating a herb spiral. First, by making use of both the vertical and the horizontal space, it allows you to make maximum use of a small growing area. This is particularly beneficial to those with little or no garden. The curved nature of the planting beds also increases the growing area available, compared to more traditional straight-edged gardens.

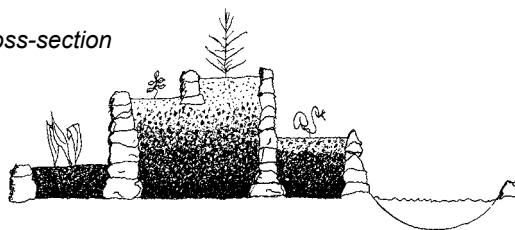
Due to its design, the herb spiral offers a variety of different microclimates and aspects that are all easily accessible. The benefits of this diversity of habitats are obvious: the gardener is able to plant a wide range of plants, all with differing needs and uses, in a very small area. Oil-rich herbs such as rosemary, thyme and sage can be grown on the dry and sunny top southerly side, whereas the moist and sheltered base on the northerly side is perfect for green foliage herbs such as mint, parsley and coriander. There is even the potential to create a small pond or bog area at the base of the spiral for plants such as watercress and watermint.

The advantages of having such diversity extend beyond convenience to the chef. The nature of the herb spiral, with close interplanting of many different species, can create mutually beneficial relationships between the different herbs (companion planting) and establish a healthy, stable and diverse environment, attracting a range of attractive and useful wildlife.

Some plants are great pest deterrents, for example, basil, calendula, and French marigold. Other herbs attract insects, such as ladybirds and bees, that feed on pests. Lemon balm, marjoram, chamomile and French marigold are particularly useful for this. Borage and chamomile are good for improving the growth and taste of neighbouring plants.



Cross-section



Finally, the aesthetic pleasure the herb spiral creates is just as important. Its fluid curves and height add interest to the largely horizontal nature of most gardens, as well as providing an unique conversational piece.

How to construct it

Virtually any building materials can be used, as long as they're reasonably long-lived. Anything from wooden stakes, to large slates, bricks, stones, bottles stacked on their side, or even scrap tyres can be used to create the walls of the spiral.

If you are building directly onto earth, it's advisable to mulch the area beforehand, to prevent weed problems whilst the herbs are establishing themselves. You can use anything water permeable, such as cardboard or old carpet. If you are building onto concrete, break it up to ensure adequate drainage.

You can choose one of two methods of construction. The simplest and possibly less stable method, at least

while the herbs are becoming established, is to pile the soil into a large heap, and insert stones, slates, etc. to create a spiral shape. Because there is a danger of the soil washing away in rain or blowing away in wind before the plants are established, it is best to use pot-grown plants if you choose this method.

The second method is more permanent and more involved: First, stake out the spiral shape using sticks, bamboo etc. The base should be typically between 1.5-2m in diameter. Next, construct the walls, starting from the outside and moving inwards. Add more layers, gradually increasing the height as you move into the centre (see cross section diagram). If you are using mortar, add the soil at the end. If you are using a 'dry stone' technique, add the soil as you go to give more support and stability.

A word about permaculture

The herb spiral has been pioneered largely through permaculture, a design system that models sustainable human settlements on natural ecosystems.

The herb spiral beautifully represents some of its main principles through its energy-efficient design, the stacking of plants to promote best use of space, and the diversity of plants used to create a productive, stable and healthy niche in your garden.

To find out more about permaculture, see Bill Mollison's *Introduction to Permaculture*, or contact the Permaculture Association at BCM Permaculture Association, London, WC1N 3XX. Tel/fax: 0845 458 1805 or 0113 230 7461. email: office@permaculture.org.uk
Website: www.permaculture.org.uk

Try and use relatively weed-free soil for obvious reasons. If soil or well rotted compost is in short supply, you can try using a base layer of fresh manure or unrotted organic waste with a layer of 8-10cm of soil on top, but be wary of the spiral settling as your base layer breaks down.

Some herbs may require different soil conditions than others. With careful planning, you can provide the optimum conditions for each – for example, adding sand to the soil for Mediterranean herbs such as rosemary. However, most will do well in good soil or compost.

To build the pond or bog at the base, first put down a layer of sand or old carpet to prevent stones or other sharp objects from puncturing the liner. Next, install a plastic liner and smooth a thin layer of mud around its surface to enable pond fauna and flora to establish quicker. Bury the edge of the lining under rocks and soil to prevent it from slipping. To build the bog area, use a perforated liner.

Planting it up

The diagram shows some of the most common herbs that can be used. If you wish to experiment, try to avoid any herbs that may be too invasive or too large for the space. For example, mint can be particularly rampant, so it's a good idea to plant this in a pot within the spiral to restrict its roots. Here are some further suggestions for more difficult areas of the spiral:

Shady plants

- Sweet violet (*Viola odorata*): This creeping evergreen perennial grows to be approximately 15cm tall. Both the leaves and flowers are tasty in winter salads. It can be used as a gentle expectorant.
- Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*): This native perennial will reach a mature size of 60cm high and 30cm wide. It is very tolerant of a range of conditions, and is easily grown. The lemon-flavoured leaves can be used in salads or like spinach.
- Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*): At maturity, this herb is 70cm tall and 40cm wide. It is very tolerant of a range of conditions and will succeed in light shade. The lemon-flavoured leaves can be used in salads or to make a refreshing tea.
- Wild garlic (*Allium ursinum*): This grows well in wet soils and will reach a height of up to 30cm. The garlic-flavoured leaves are available in February/March. Note that it can be invasive.

Plants for wall spaces

You can increase your growing area further by planting into the walls of the spiral. If you have dry stone walls, then there are probably already pockets of soil to plant into. If not, Ken Fern, in his excellent book *Plants For A Future*, recommends mixing up a paste of compost and water, adding the seeds of the required herb and painting it onto the wall.

- Rock cress (*Arabis caucasica*): This evergreen perennial grows up to 15cm tall. The cress-like leaves are available year-round.
- Strawberries (*Fragaria species*): These grow well in sunny or partly shaded walls and can reach a height of 15-25cm. *Fragaria vesca* is a good choice – a native species with small delicious fruit.
- Thyme (*Thymus species*): This dwarf, spreading evergreen needs a sunny location. Use it in salads, or as flavouring for cooked foods.

Pond plants

The following plants grow best in water 5-30cm deep.

- Watercress (*Nasturtium officinalis*): This native plant will often grow all year round in mild conditions. It is highly nutritious.
- Waterfringe (*Nymphoides peltata*): This can be quite vigorous, and the stems will grow up to 1.5m tall. Both the leaves and stems can be used like spinach.

Bog plants

- Pickerel weed (*Pontederia cordata*): This plant will be 75cm tall and 50cm wide at maturity. The seeds can be eaten raw, or cooked like rice. The young leaves and shoots can be used in salads.
- Golden saxifrage (*Chrysplenium alternifolium*): This is a low-growing, creeping native plant, 20cm tall and 50cm wide. It prefers shade. The leaves can be used in salads in the early spring.

Further information

The following CAT publications discuss the creation of sustainable organic gardens:

- *Creative Sustainable Gardening*, Diana Anthony, CAT Publications, 2000, £12.99
- *Composting Secrets Tipsheet*
- *Hot Composting Tipsheet*
- *Cool Composting Factsheet*

The above titles are available direct from CAT Mail Order – tel. 01654 705959 to order or receive the complete Buy Green By Mail catalogue. Visit www.cat.org.uk/catpubs to order, read reviews or download tipsheets and factsheets.

Other titles of interest:

- *Plants For A Future*, Ken Fern, Permanent Publications, 1997.
- *Pocket Encyclopedia of Herbs*, Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 1997.
- *Complete Book of Companion Planting*, Bob Flowerdew, Kyle Cathie Ltd., 1993.
- *What Plant Where*, Roy Lancaster, Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 1995.
- *Introduction to Permaculture*, Bill Mollison with Rena Mia Slay, Tagari Publications, 1994.