

Cure the Winter Doldrums with Comfort Plants

During these dull, dark, dreary days when spring is reluctant to even flirt with us, we need comfort plants inside. Not the ubiquitous, unchanging Mother-in-law tongue that we can ignore for weeks, but herbs with their promise of taste and fragrance. To learn more about the culture and uses of herbs I went to the Gloucester Library a cold rainy evening last week to watch Gloucester Master Gardeners Joanne Gallagher and Mary Simpson display the taste and charm of herbs.

Both of these seasoned gardeners undertook community service as gardeners after earlier careers in the nursing profession, so TLC is in their genes. Mary was largely responsible for the Horticultural Therapy program at Walter Reed Convalescent Center and Joanne served the fun-filled fourth-graders program, "Ready, Set, Grow."

The evening provided not just the history and culture of herbs but tasty samples of their use in cooking. Audience questions as well as audience experiences gave a local flavor to the program. Joanne has been able to winter-over lemon grass by heaping mulch around it but for others it is a one-year plant. She stressed not giving up on plants that may appear to have been winter-killed but to wait until the arrival of hot weather.

Mary demonstrated the methods of propagation that are successful with herbs by sowing seeds into potting soil, sprinkling them with a thin layer of fine soil, and leaving them damp but not soaked under their plastic dome. Plastic bags containing cups with holes in the bottom became miniature greenhouses for the cuttings of bay laurel inserted into the potting soil. To facilitate the rooting, Mary cut the green leaves in half.

Layering, a method easily used on larger plants that spread branches on the ground will also work with herbs by abrading the part in contact with the soil and holding them down with a stone or brick. The use of a rooting hormone is important with both cuttings and layering.

Gardeners may, of course, follow tradition and lay out herb gardens in simple geometric patterns, such as triangles within rectangles outlined by constantly trimmed boxwood or occasionally trimmed germander, an easier choice for here. Or, defying tradition, gardeners can pick and choose, filling their hot, dry spots with exuberant fennel so they can add the licorice seeds to sugar cookies in lieu of caraway. They can use herbs to cover beds of collapsing bulb foliage, line paths with thyme, soften the aspect of more rigid shrubs with feathery dill.

Caraway, *Carum carvi*, is another herb that frequents waste ground and grasslands from Europe to western Asia but can be grown here. It is a tap-rooted biennial with midsummer tiny flowers in clusters: it requires fertile soil. The licorice flavored

seeds can be sown where you want it to grow. It is only two feet high so if you need a giant, grow fennel, a member of the same family, *Foeniculum vulgare*. It grows to six feet and also self-seeds. You can start fennel seeds inside in late March and transfer them when the soil warms in mid-May.

Because so many herbs have Mediterranean ancestry they prosper in hot dry summers, abhor poorly drained locations and generally die if subject to wet roots in winter. Fascinating subject, herbs. Primarily medical but their affect on food was important. Today they add interest to simple meals but in the Middle Ages their value was in preserving food and disguising the loss of taste engendered by lack of refrigeration.

The medical importance of herbs is unquestioned since most modern medicines had their origin in things that grow. For example, according to a plant book, "The Green Inheritance", chopped garlic "releases a sulphur-containing volatile oil which has antibiotic activity, is an expectorant...and helps to lower blood pressure."

For many gardeners, their love for herbs may not be entirely medical nor culinary but artistic. They love the greys of santolina, lavender, sage and artemisia and the golds of lemon balm, tansy and thyme. For a touch of purple, they let the perilla seedlings remain and encourage purple basil because it is beautiful and not just because it is demanded by tomato devotees.