Want to spice up your cooking and spruce up your garden at the same time? If so, try planting some herbs. Many attractive, flavorful and aromatic herbs can be grown with ease in most home gardens. If space is at a premium, don't worry, a few of these small plants go a long way in providing for culinary needs.

The variety of shapes, sizes, textures and colors of herb species lend them to the creation of unique and pleasing garden compositions. Rather than rows, plant your herbs in small informal beds. A space as small as five feet square will allow you to plant several varieties. You can also mix herbs among landscape plants, or use them to create borders, ground covers or low hedges. Herbs can also be grown in nooks and crannies between stones, pavers, or patio blocks.

Many people like growing herbs in pots, containers, even hanging baskets. Sage, thyme, and rosemary make extremely attractive patio pot plants. Windowsill gardens can be created using mints, chives, oregano, and basil planted in four and six inch pots.

Growing herbs in a raised bed is a perfect way to grow them. This provides the plants what they like; good drainage and soil rich in organic matter. Use soil consisting of mostly desert soil with compost mixed in. The plants will love it!

Raised beds should be a minimum one foot high, and no more than five feet across to keep plants in easy reach. They can be constructed out of materials such as slump block, concrete block, landscape timbers, or pressure treated wood four by 4's. Pressure treated lumber should be the wolmanized type, which is salt preserved and nontoxic to plants. Wolmanized lumber has a nice light green tint and blends well with plants.

When growing herbs in pots and containers, use a good potting soil. Don't skimp by purchasing poor quality, inexpensive potting soil. You can make your own mix by using equal
parts of peat moss, vermiculite, perlite, and coarse sand. In small raised bed gardens prepare your own potting soil mix or use compost material, such as locally prepared commercial desert compost. In-ground herb gardens should also be prepared using organic amendments. Mix a three inch layer of peat moss, compost or other organic amendments into the top twelve inches of soil. At the same time also mix in some ammonium phosphate fertilizer at the rate of one pound for each 100 square foot of garden area.

After planting your herb garden, the soil should be kept moist, but not soggy wet. Remember, herbs in pots and raised beds will need more frequent watering than those planted in the ground. Pot plants may need twice daily watering in the heat of the summer. A simple drip irrigation system is ideal for herbs growing in pots. In raised or in-ground beds use leaky pipe or soaker hose placed evenly throughout the bed. Space the hose no farther than one foot apart to provide even watering.

There are many flavorful and interesting herbs that can be grown here in the low desert area. Here is just a sampling of the most popular and easiest to grow:

Basil, also called sweet basil is a pleasant smelling annual plant with a spicy taste. There are many types, some large and some small. Leaf colors range from green to purple to variegated. Basil grows well in the garden or as a potted plant. Plant in early spring or fall. Cooks favor it for all kinds of tomato dishes. It can also be added to soups, vegetables and Italian dishes.

Chives are small perennial, onion-like plants that grow in a clumping fashion. Leaves are topped with attractive pink flowers beginning in early spring. Plants can be purchased or grown from seed. Established clumps can be divided and transplanted. Garlic chives are similar
in appearance to regular chives but have a slightly garlic flavor. The leaves of chives can be cut, diced and added to foods to impart a mild onion-like flavor.

Chamomile is a hardy perennial plant used for brewing tea. It is a fine leafed matting plant growing to a height of one foot when in bloom. Flowers are white daisy-like with yellow centers. The plant roots easily from layered stems and cuttings. Established plants can also be divided. Teas are brewed from the chamomile blossoms.

Dill is an annual herb whose leaves and seeds are popular flavorings for pickles, sauerkraut and beet dishes. It is an erect, strong smelling fennel-like plant reaching a height of four feet. Seeds of dill can be planted in the fall or early spring. Large, attractive yellow, umbrella shaped flower heads provide ample seeds flavoring and reseeding.

Mints such as peppermint and spearmint are hardy perennials used to make herbal tea, flavor drinks and liqueurs, and to make mint sauce. Mints are some of the easiest to grow perennial herbs for Arizona gardens. They grow profusely in sun or shade. Start plants in moist soil using surface or underground runners as sprigs for new plants. The leaves and flowering tops are the useful parts, both for fresh and dried.

Oregano is recognized to be of two main types, Mexican and European. The latter are also called wild marjoram. The two types are dissimilar in taste, but alike in usage. The European is much milder. Both types may be grown from seed sown in the spring or propagated by cuttings. Cut the tender tops of both herbs just as flowers begin. Add oregano to Italian-type sauces, pizza, and meats.

Thyme, a shrubby perennial herb, is represented by a fairly wide variety of shapes and sizes. Usually, it is a small growing plant less than one and one half feet tall, with very tiny gray-green leaves. Purplish flowers are formed on the ends of the stems. New plants can be started from seed or by dividing established plants. For best growth, thyme should be replanted every three or four years. To use, remove the top one third portion of the plant when in full bloom and spread on newspaper to dry. Then strip the leaves and flowering tops from the stem and store in tightly closed containers. Use in gumbos, clam chowder, stuffing and meat dishes.

Herbs are easy to grow, fun and flavorful to boot. Plant some now in your yard or in pots and you will have a good supply for the coming holiday season.
For more information contact The University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension at 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman or telephone 928-753-3788.

CONTACT:  ROB GRUMBLES
Extension Agent, Agriculture
The University of Arizona
Mohave County Cooperative Extension
101 E Beale Street, Suite A
Kingman AZ 86401-5808
mohavece@cals.arizona.edu

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