

In your organic herb garden in August 2012

Many herbs will be in flower now, providing valuable food for bees and other insects. Despite the wet conditions in recent weeks, herbs have grown reasonably well. If we get some sunshine this month, your herb patch could be filled with the scent of rosemary, lavender, or thyme, as plants release the scent of their oils in the summer heat.

August is also a good month to trim shrubby herbs to keep a tidy shape. Strip the leaves from the shoots you have trimmed off, and either dry or freeze them for winter use. Let a few flower heads set seed for sowing next season.

Things to do in the herb garden this month

- Cut back herbs in flower. This will encourage them to bush out and produce more leaves.
- Cut back chives if showing signs of rust (orange patches up the stems). New, clean shoots will quickly re-grow.
- Cut back mint if it is looking tired. Just like chives, new growth is rapidly produced.
- If we do get a long dry spell, water herbs in containers. They have a lot of thirsty foliage at the moment, and hot summer sun will dry them out faster than you might think.
- Avoid walking on the soil if your herbs are growing in heavy clay. Clay soil is saturated at the moment and will take some time to drain. Walking on it now will just compact it, squashing out any air, and ruining the plants' growing conditions.
- Mulch moisture-loving herbs, to prevent them drying out.
- Cut back box, cotton lavender and the curry plant to maintain shape.
- Trim lavender once flowering finishes. Use shears to give plants a good 'haircut', but don't cut back hard into old wood as it will not re-grow.
- Take softwood cuttings [See below for instructions on taking softwood cuttings](#)



Drying lavender. The paper 'hat' keeps the dust off.



Uneven lavender

- Keep sowing seed outside - to maintain supplies. [See below for suggestions of which herbs to sow](#)
- Thin seedlings that were sown direct last month.
- Dead-head faded flowers, but leave just a few for collecting seeds for next season.
- Flowers of lavender, love-in-a-mist and cornflower can also be dried for decoration. [See below for instructions on drying herbs](#)
- Begin gathering seed from coriander, fennel and other herbs, as seedpods mature. Snip off seed heads once they have dried after the night's moisture. Place in labeled paper bags or envelopes and leave in a cool dry spot until seed cases are totally dry and the seeds tumble out. Store in screw top jars in a cool dry place.
- Freeze storage flowers in ice cubes to decorate your summer drinks.
- If planting a lavender hedge or border, make sure you buy all the same varieties. When plants are small, difference in size, colour or flowering time can be hard to spot. But once plants are growing well, the desired effect can be spoiled by a mixture of varieties.



Flavour from the garden this month

Nearly all herbs should be available from the garden this month. Here are a few suggestions. Don't forget that you can use the flowers and seeds of some herbs, not just their leaves.

Edible flowers from the herb garden

Using flowers in salads and cookery is an ancient method of adding flavour and colour to food. Pick early in the day, once any overnight moisture has gone, but before the sun becomes too hot. Take care not to bruise the delicate blooms.

Scented geraniums *Pelargonium spp.*

Pot marigold *Calendula officinalis*

Nasturtium *Tropaeolum majus*

Hollyhock *Alcea rosea*

Heartsease *Viola tricolor*

Violet *Viola odorata*

Pinks *Dianthus sp.*

Rocket *Eruca versicaria*

Borage *Borago officinalis*

Day lily *Hemerocallis sp.*

Rose *Rosa sp.*

Lavender (*Lavandula spp.*) Hardy perennial

Lavender shortbread

Make your favourite shortbread recipe and press some flowers into the top of the ready-to-bake shapes before baking. You can also use the flowers to flavour home-made ice-cream, as an alternative to vanilla.

Warning!

Only eat flowers that you are sure are edible, and that you are sure you can identify correctly. Some flowers, just like other parts of the plants, can be very poisonous. Do not eat flowers from florist shops, as they are highly likely to have been sprayed with pesticides



Cut back chives before they flower to keep the leaves young and fresh for eating. But bees and other insects love chive flowers, so leave a few plants untrimmed for them (and you) to enjoy.

Edible leaves from the herb garden

- Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) Hardy perennial
Add to summer salads, or use a garnish for soups and sauces. Chives do not dry well but can be frozen in ice cube trays with a little water, or milk if you want chivey mash. Mix chopped chives into your usual recipe for cheese scones.
- Tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) Hardy perennial
French Tarragon is the one to grow. It is far superior to Russian Tarragon. As it doesn't produce viable seed, it must be propagated by other methods. Flowers should be removed to encourage the plant to put its energy into leaf production. Nice with cheeses, also add to quiches and flans.



- Red basil is just one of many varieties
- Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) Annual
A popular summer herb that is easy to grow from seed and comes in several varieties. If you grow more than one variety, don't save your own seeds for next year, as you won't get the same variety. If you don't plan on saving seeds for next year, keep removing the flowers to ensure maximum leaf production. Add the leaves at the last minute to tomato and meat dishes or stir torn leaves with a dash of olive oil into hot pasta for an easy lunch.

Basil does really well in pots on a sunny windowsill. Leaves of indoor plants tend to be big and soft compared with those grown outside. Plants will continue to produce plenty of leaves well into November if given plenty of light. They are also very thirsty plants, needing almost daily watering to keep those leaves lush and soft.

Basil Oil recipe

Crush the leaves in a mortar then place in an airtight jar and cover with olive oil. Leave the jar on a sunny windowsill, shaking every other day. After 2 weeks, strain oil through a muslin and discard the leaves.



- Rosemary ready to pick
- Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) Hardy perennial
Rosemary should be putting out lots of fresh young shoots over the summer.

Rosemary and lemon ice lollies

Add the zest of two lemons to a cup and a half of sugar, add a cup of water and the rosemary. Bring the mixture to the boil, stirring until the sugar melts. Simmer for around ten minutes, then strain and cool. Add another seven cups of water and one cup of fresh lemon juice. Pour into ice-lolly moulds to make a lovely cooling snack for high summer.

Edible seed from the organic herb garden

- Caraway (*Carum carvi*) Biennial
Caraway is a member of the carrot family, and like its cousins is a good attractant flower for beneficial insects. It also yields delicious, aromatic seeds, ready to harvest this month. Use in bread and biscuits, as well as any recipes with cabbage.

Herb combinations

It is not always easy to know which herbs go well together. Here are some examples to try.

Bouquet garni for casseroles, stews and sauces : 2 sprigs parsley + 2 sprigs thyme + 1 bay leaf

Bouquet garni for fish : 2 sprigs parsley + 1 sprig tarragon + 1 dry fennel stalk + 1 leaf lemon balm. Add to cooking liquid or sauce

Fines herbes : 1 part parsley + 1 part chervil + half part chives + 1 or 2 leaves tarragon. Chop herbs finely before adding to omelets and other dishes.

Make your own Herbes de Provence

- 1 tsp dried thyme
- 1 tsp ground rosemary
- 1 tsp summer savory
- 1/2 tsp lavender (optional but traditional)
- 1 tsp marjoram
- 1 tsp dried basil
- 1/2 tsp dried sage
- 1/2 tsp dried oregano

Herbs to propagate this month

Seed sowing

For a continual crop, sow the following in a prepared seedbed, outdoors:

- Angelica (*Angelica archangelica*) Biennial
Native to continental Europe, where it grows alongside streams and in other damp places. Sow seed in early autumn in its final location – angelica hates to have its roots disturbed. It needs no protection from frosts, but does require deep, moist soil and a site where its roots are in shade, but its flowers get some sun.
- Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) Annual
This herb has been cultivated for more than 3000 years. It is mentioned in the Old Testament, and is traditionally eaten at Passover feasts. Sow the large seeds into drills in light, well-drained soil in a sunny spot; coriander dislikes damp, humid conditions. If your soil is heavy clay, sow in a pot into purchased potting compost. Direct sowing works best as coriander does not transplant well and tends to bolt. It also runs to seed very rapidly, so keep sowing every two weeks until the end of the month to ensure a fresh crop of leaves.

[Two types of organic coriander](#) available in the Organic Gardening Catalogue. 'Cilantro' is a special selection for leaf production.

- Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) Hardy perennial
As suggested by its common name, lovage was used as an aphrodisiac during the 16th Century. Lovage is a large plant (up to 2m) and takes up to five years to reach maturity. When selecting a site ensure that the plant will have enough room to grow. Prefers a rich, fertile, well-drained soil in full sun or partial shade. Direct sow in autumn, thinning to 60cm apart when large enough.
- Dill (*Anethum graveolens*) Hardy annual
Originating in the Far East, this herb has been used for more than 5000 years. Direct sow into poor, well-drained soils in full sun. The tall (1.5m) plants are rather fragile and may require support. Collect as much seed as possible to prevent the plant spreading too rapidly.

Do not plant dill near to fennel if you are growing both for seed, as the two will cross-pollinate and produce inferior plants..

- Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) Hardy biennial
Parsley seed takes 3-6 weeks to germinate in open ground. Direct sow in early autumn into deep, fertile soil in sun or partial shade. Thin first to 8cm, then 15cm apart as the plants grow. Or sow seeds in a good size (12cm/5ins deep) pot. Keep on a sunny windowsill, or in a greenhouse. Once seedlings are a decent size (7cm/3ins high) they can be planted out into open ground. To encourage germination, after seeds are sown, pour boiling water over them! It seems to help. If you wish to continue to harvest leaves, remove flowers as soon as they appear.

Cuttings to take

Take cuttings from bay, wormwoods, rosemary, thymes, lavenders, sages, scented geraniums (*Pelargonium spp.*), Balm of Gilead (*Cedronella triphylla*), pineapple and other tender sages, and myrtles.

'**Softwood**' is the term given to the type of cutting taken from young growth in the spring and early summer.

Here are the main points to follow:

- Take cuttings early in the morning
- Choose non-flowering shoots if possible. Or nip off flowers.
- Take cuttings with a knife or secateurs rather than scissors (which squash the stem)
- Cuttings should be placed in a polythene bag **immediately** they are cut from the parent plant.
- Prepare pots or seed trays with good organic potting compost mixed with extra grit or coarse sand. 1 part grit to 4 parts potting compost is a good mix.
- Trim the cutting to just below a node (where leaf joins stem) and remove any leaves from bottom two thirds of the stem. This will reduce water loss as well as the possibility of fungus developing on leaves touching the soil.
- Make a hole with a dibber and push cutting in. Make sure the bottom of cutting touches the bottom of hole. Rooting seems to be encouraged where cuttings are inserted just inside the pot, touching the pot side.
- Firm compost around cutting
- Water, but do not leave pot standing in water. Potting compost should only be just moist

Covering with a plastic bag or cloche can aid in germination in some cases. Remove the covering daily, shake off condensation, and turn inside out before replacing. This will help airflow and reduce the likelihood of fungal diseases building up. Silver-leaved or furry-leaved plants, such as rosemary, lavender, or pelargonium, should not be covered.

Potting up herbs for a winter supply

It's tempting to pot up herbs in order to keep them growing overwinter, but some are fussier than others. Not all will keep growing well, even if brought indoors. It seems that some plants, such as chives and mint, need a period of dormancy, while others, basil and coriander for example, just don't like the low light levels of a British winter. But parsley does well indoors, as does oregano.

Pot up in gritty compost, and keep in a well-lit and airy spot.

Preserving herbs for winter use

Drying

- Suitable herbs for drying include bay, mint, rosemary and thyme.

- Pick leaves for drying early in the morning, when the dew has just lifted.
- Hang the herbs upside down in bunches in a dry, well-ventilated, dark place. Hallways and landings are good places. To protect from dust, peg a ‘coolie hat’ of tissue or greaseproof paper around the top of the hanging bunch.
- Another option is to strip the leaves from the stems then lay the herbs out on racks or trays and place these in a similar location
- Electric dryers are also available.
- The herbs are ready for storing when they are crisp to the touch, but not brittle. Store them in airtight containers in a cool, dark, dry place. They should last for up to a year.

Freezing

- Suitable herbs for freezing include basil, chervil, chives, fennel leaves, summer savory and parsley.
- Wash and finely chop your herbs.
- Cram them into ice-cube trays, cover with water and freeze. Chives can be frozen in milk for chivey mash.
- Remove them from the trays and store in labelled plastic bags.
- Add to dishes at the end of the cooking time. Especially useful for winter stews, soups and sauces.

Pest and Disease Watch

Bay tree sucker damage will be evident now. Look for discoloured and distorted leaves. Snip off any affected foliage and dispose of in the green-waste bin.

If your bay tree is free of sucker damage, but has yellowed leaves, it could be a sign of waterlogging. Bay prefers well-drained soil so plants growing in clay soil will be at risk after the recent wet weather. Spike the area around the tree with a fork, to reduce compaction, and fork in some horticultural grit.