

Five Cold- Hardy Herbs to Grow

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Nothing seasons up a savory winter soup or stew like fresh herbs. It is possible, even in a tough growing climate, to harvest herbs in colder parts of the year. The following five herbs are among the easiest to overwinter, and with cold protection, can result in expanded harvest windows. They are also adaptable to a wide range of cooking styles.

Parsley An oddity of the plant world, parsley and its relatives are biennial, completing the life cycle in two years. In a protected location, parsley can provide fresh, vitamin C-packed leaves for close to two years. Once it sets flower, the leaves will become bitter, but the flowers last a long time in a vase and are beneficial to pollinators. Parsley seed is tough to germinate, and requires patience. Parsley is a taprooted plant that does not always transplant well. Once past the seedling stage, it's easy to grow.

Rosemary Invest in a plant, it's tough to grow from seed, and make sure it's in a place where the soil will drain well even in winter. "Wet feet" is death to rosemary. A sunny, southern exposure, possibly in a rock garden, is a good location. Older plants are especially hardy, and the evergreen plants provide leaves all year. To introduce the flavor and aroma to pickier eaters without the leaves, try using the woody stems as kabob skewers.

Chives Once a patch of chives gets going, it provides a long- term source of mild, oniony flavor. The flowers are edible and beautiful as a salad or soup garnish. Chives should be cut back in the fall, and will not be available over the winter, but are one of the first signs of life in the early spring garden. When harvesting, clip chives all the way back to the ground. More leaves will replace those, but half-cut leaves do not re-grow.

Thyme this low-growing perennial is well suited to a rock garden, and when blooming in spring and fall is a great resource for our pollinators. Thyme cultivars vary widely in cold hardiness- look for varieties that specifically mention hardiness for best results in our area. As long as soil is well drained, thyme is easy to grow- and easy to use in the kitchen.

Oregano slightly less hardy than, but otherwise similar to thyme, oregano is easy to grow. There are many varieties of oregano, which needs a sunny location and will also benefit from the soil- warming properties of a rock garden. Oregano will go dormant in winter. You can cut back its long runners in fall, and store the cuttings in a glass jar. These will keep for several weeks in the fridge, increasing the length of time they can be enjoyed fresh.

Several of these herbs are also easy to store, so they can be enjoyed even when not fresh from the plant. Parsley loses most of its flavor dried, so freezing clipped leaves in ice cube trays is an alternative. Freeze clipped leaves and water to make herbal ice cubes, store in a bag when frozen, and drop into soups or stews near the end of cooking. Chives, rosemary, and thyme are all very easy to dry, whether with a dehydrator or by hanging stems upside down in bunches to dry in the open air. For those with little garden space or small yards, these herbs are also all suitable for container gardening, but overwintering success for containerized plants varies from that of those in the ground.