

Latin Name/Genus: *Ocimum basilicum*
(*Holy basil* is *O. tenuiflora*)
Family: *Lamiaceae*

Difficulty: Easy

Season: Warm season

Exposure: Full sun

Zone: Hardy to Zone 11



Timing: Basil grows well in containers indoors at any time of year provided you can supply enough light. For outdoor growing, sow basil seeds throughout late spring for transplanting to the garden after the summer solstice; direct sow in early summer, once the soil has warmed up. Basil requires warm soil and full sun. Optimal temperature for germination: 21°C; seeds should sprout in 5-10 days.

Starting: Sow seeds 1cm (1/2") deep in sterilized seed starting mix. Basil is prone to damping off, so once seeds sprout, make sure they are adequately ventilated, and kept under very bright light. Thin to 20-25cm (8-10") apart. Using bottom heat speeds germination.

Growing: Use any rich, loose, well drained soil. Once plants are 15cm (6") tall, pinch out the growing tips to encourage really bushy growth prior to harvest. Watch for signs of flower buds forming in mid-summer, and pinch these off to promote more foliage.

Nutrient Preferences: Basil loves regular feedings of the staple macronutrients nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium.

Harvest: As with many herbs, frequent harvesting will prolong the life of the plant. Basil leaves have the best flavour just before the plant flowers, and if you plan to preserve some of your basil or make a big batch of pesto, this is the best time to harvest. Flowering can be delayed by pinching or clipping off new flower buds. Tear basil rather than chop with a knife because chopping tends to bruise the leaves, and add basil to food just before serving so as to get the full effect. Cooking for any length tends to increase the mintyness of the basil. Basil is best fresh, but can be preserved by drying or by freezing; to freeze, tear the leaves into small pieces and freeze small batches of them, with water, in ice cube trays; the frozen cubes can be saved and labeled in zip-lock type bags, and will keep for up to four months.

Companion Planting: Basil is thought by many gardeners to improve vigour and flavour of tomatoes, planted side-by-side. It's also good with asparagus, oregano, and peppers; basil helps repel flies, mosquitoes, and thrips.