

Consider Herbs for Your Perennial Borders

Herbs aren't just for cooking. Many herbs and their relatives are perennial plants that perform just as well as other perennials in the landscape.

Herbs are available as shrubs, short to tall massing plants, or as creeping groundcovers. Pair them with bright, flowering perennials and notice how their foliage sparkles. Brush against their leaves and breathe in the incredible fragrance.

Many sun-loving herbs come with characteristics that help them adapt to dry, exposed conditions. Fuzzy leaves, a petite growth habit, or periods of late flowering are features that mesh well with a gardener's requests for attractive, tough, drought-tolerant plants. Herbs are the epitome of low maintenance.

Try outlining a perennial bed with a shrubby herb. Lavender and teucrium – used as a low 18-inch hedge – can help tame the wayward look of any mixed perennial border. Give both plants lots of sunshine and good drainage.

Lavender 'Munstead' and 'Hidcote' are two of the most reliable of the lavenders. Their silvery leaves on compact stems contain the same lavender fragrance as their flowers. Teucrium has glossy, dark green leaves. Both plants have semi-evergreen foliage. Just give them a light pruning in April to shape and to remove any winter injury.

Sage, catnip and thyme have cousins that are valuable performers in the perennial garden. Used singly or in large masses, both their leaves and blooms have significant impact.

Perennial salvia, a cousin of herb sage, has become a popular choice of home gardeners and commercial landscapers. Its ability to bloom repeatedly with narrow, upright spikes of abundant pink, blue or purple flowers throughout the summer makes it a perfect choice to pair with any other daisy-type flowering perennial.

Salvia 'East Friesland' is beautiful partnered Coreopsis 'Moonbeam'; Salvia 'May Night' is lovely when planted beside Rudbeckia 'Viette's Little Suzy'.

Herb sage has another lesser-known cousin. Berggarten sage grows into a chubby, 18-inch mound of rounded, silvery leaves. Its predominant fuzzy gray foliage blends well with any pastel tone in the border. Try it with Echinacea 'Magnus'.

Russian sage is another, more distant relative to herb sage. Its 4-foot stature and vase-shaped silhouette make it an appropriate specimen plant in the perennial border.

Herb catnip has perennial relatives, too. They are tough, but much better behaved. Perennial catnip, botanically known as Nepeta, is just as fragrant as catnip, yet it maintains a perfectly mounded form. Fuzzy gray-green leaves sit beneath floating centers

of pale blue-purple blossoms. Nepeta 'Six Hills Giant' can grow as tall as 36 inches. Nepeta 'Little Titch' barely reaches 10 inches tall.

Nepetas are stunning when paired with daylilies sporting soft yellow blooms or roses boasting pastel pink flowers.

Herb thyme has variable hardiness in our Midwestern gardens. Coccineus is a one of the toughest, most reliable and drought-tolerant. It has a very low, creeping habit. It explodes into brilliant pink by mid summer. This is a nice choice for filling the gaps between patio stones.

Historically, herbs were used in the formal gardens of English castles and French chateaux. Take a lesson from the past and find a place for herbs in your garden, too.

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