

# Cultivating an Herbal Sanctuary

**Written By John R. Beaudry**

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**With the popularity of alternative medicines** and treatments today, herbal remedies are one of America's latest obsessions. Who isn't familiar with Ginkgo Biloba, St. John's Wort, or Echinacea? Many of us could even rattle off the beneficial effects of these most popular herbal remedies. But who has considered growing these plants? What do they actually look like? And how would they fit into our gardens?

It so happens that medicinal herbs are some of our most common garden plants. Because many medicinal herbs perform quite well, it makes sense to consider including them in our gardens; thus cultivating an herbal sanctuary in our own back yard. Many of us may already be growing them, unaware these plants are the source of the products we consume.

The definition of an herb is any plant or plant part that is valued for its medicinal, savory, or aromatic qualities. This includes a wide range of plant types. For example, *Ginkgo biloba* is the Latin name for an excellent shade tree with striking fan-shaped leaves. As well as being the oldest living tree species, it is also one of the oldest herbal remedies known. Records of its use date back to ancient China where it was used as a treatment for skin rashes. Today it is more commonly used as a memory stimulant, even showing promise for Alzheimer's patients.

St. John's Wort may be better known for its calming effect on our nerves, but it also makes an excellent shrub with bright yellow flowers through much of the summer. It is tolerant of shade and is also drought resistant. And many people are surprised to find out that the Echinacea extract we use to stimulate our immune systems comes from the popular native Midwestern coneflower.

Even people who are not "into" herbal medicine probably already have a dozen or so medicinal herbs in their pantry. Most culinary herbs and spices are medicinal as well as savory. In fact, to our ancient ancestors, their flavor enhancement was just as important as their primary benefit of food preservation and medicine.



*Above: Few trees match the golden fall color produced by the Ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba*). The leaves often pave the ground beneath them with gold. The Ginkgo is a living fossil; fossils related to modern Ginkgo have been found that date back 270 million years.*

Cultivation of healing plants dates back many centuries and evolved hand in hand with the study of medicine. Virtually all cultures have studied plants for their medicinal value. Around 2000 BC the Asian Indian medical system, known as Ayurveda or "Science of Life" was being developed. The teachings of Ayurvedic medicine were incorporated into the *Rig Veda* where over 1000 medicinal plants are listed.

Ancient Greeks and Romans were also renowned herbalists. Many references to medicinal herbs from India are found in the Greek *De Materia*

*Medica* written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Surgeons who traveled with the Roman army spread their herbal expertise throughout the Roman Empire to what are now Spain, Germany, France, and England. These surgeons compiled herbal references that remained the definitive medical texts for 1500 years.

Through the Middle Ages, herbal knowledge was preserved in monasteries. Before the establishment of universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the monasteries acted as schools of medicine. Monks copied and translated many of the Greek and Roman works. They planted and maintained what they referred to as “physic” gardens, which were well stocked with useful medicinal herbs and served as the training grounds for the next generation of lay people and of physicians.

In the history of Native American herbology the concept of the medicine man is well known. Twentieth century researchers were quick to note the value of our native flora. Honeysuckle, whose perfumed stems adorn fences and trellises today, was used by Native Americans to treat a number of ailments. Today researchers have found it effective in lowering blood pressure and cholesterol.

The key to growing herbs successfully is to choose plants whose needs match the conditions of one’s own garden. As with any home project, do some research before running out to the garden center. Assess the conditions of your garden site by studying the soil, observing sun and shade patterns, and noting the plant hardiness zone. Chicago is zone 5. For a zone 5 garden that is in full sun with sandy, dry soil, choose blazing star (*Liatrus*) ornamental onion (*Allium spp.*) or even coneflower (*Echinacea*). For more shady

areas with moist soil try planting black snakeroot (*Cimicifuga*), monkshood (*Aconitum*), or Solomon’s seal, (*Polygonatum*). In one small herb garden, you can grow herbs for culinary, aromatic, and medicinal use, as long as the plants needs match.

To determine the cultural needs of herbs, a good reference is essential. An excellent book that has been recently revised is *The New Encyclopedia of Herbs* by Deni Bown, Dorling Kindersley, 2001. This

book offers excellent photographs and detailed information on cultural needs and medicinal properties. Having consulted a reference, head to the local garden center. You will find that these plants are more commonly available than you might think.

Some sites may necessitate altering the site conditions to fit the needs of a particular plant or groups of plants. If your site does not lend itself to modification, herbs can be grown in containers. This opens

up a whole new range of possibilities. Herbs in containers can be located nearer the kitchen for easy harvesting. Containers also make it possible to grow herbs on balconies and rooftops. Anything goes for a container, but be sure to use a lightweight planting mix—not garden soil—and be sure the container has drainage holes.

Interestingly, herbs are good for the garden too. Many herbs are natural pest deterrents—easily fending off insects for themselves and neighboring plants as well. Many herbs are disease resistant and draught tolerant. Most herbs thrive in well-drained soil with only a minimal amount of water and fertilization. In fact, over-fertilizing produces leggy, floppy plants that don’t stand up. It also reduces the aromatic quality of the leaves.



Above: This representation of an herb garden from the 17th century is on display at the Weald and Downland museum in England. At that time people grew herbs for treating ailments and freshening the home along with their vegetables. Not only did the herbs play a vital role medicinally, they also helped deter insects and rodents from damaging the vegetables.



The term “herb garden” often brings to mind formal gardens with tightly sheared boxwood along the edge or the classic knot garden with tightly interlocking or patterned beds. These conceptions intimidate many



Above: *Santolina* (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*), ornamental onion (*Allium sphaerocephalon*), variegated nasturtium (*Nasturtium* spp.) and lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*) combine to create a tapestry of color in an ordinary backyard garden.

people from growing herbs. But herb gardens can be informal as well. The informal cottage style of gardening lends itself well to growing medicinal herbs. In this style herbs are mixed with standard fare garden flowers and even vegetables.

Teas can be easily made from many of these great garden plants by simply steeping the medicinal part of the plant in hot water. After a long day at work, imagine walking in the garden, snipping the leaves of some Chamomile and preparing a relaxing tea. By using herbs as garden plants, we can enhance our gardens as well as our own well being. By doing

so, we also do our small part to help preserve the genetic diversity of our plant world by increasing the numbers of these precious plants. No one knows which plant will hold the next cure for disease.

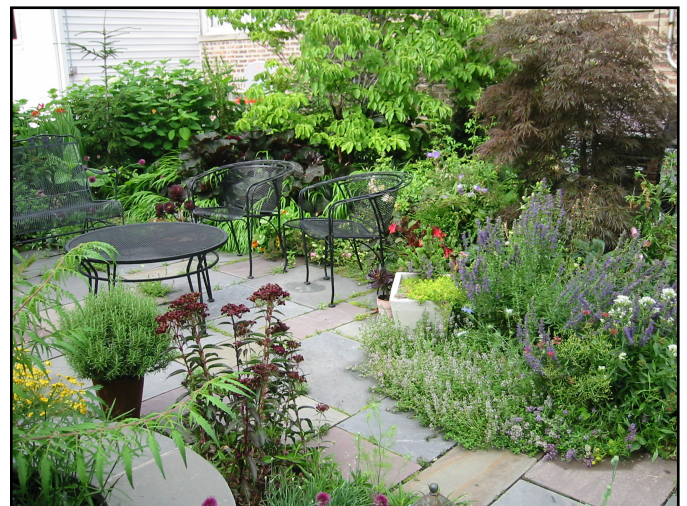
A word of caution, educate yourself before taking herbs internally. Be sure to refer to a good source of information such as the book mentioned above and always consult your doctor. If used improperly, some medicinal herbs can be quite toxic. If you are intimidated by making your own herbal remedies, perhaps the pleasures of growing medicinal herbs will be enough. The intriguing scents of various herbs woven together with flowers lends a relaxing mood to a garden and spirit that no dose of St. John's Wort could match.

## Resources

Well Sweep Herb Farm, Port Murray, NJ (908) 852-5390

Mountain Valley Growers, Squaw Valley, CA (559) 338-2775

<http://www.mountainvalleygrowers.com>



Above: A patio, surrounded by mixed plantings with a generous sprinkling of herbs provides soothing scents as well as sumptuous flavors to spice up any meal.