



Herbs for Your Winter Windowsill



Photo credit: Miia Sample via Flickr

If you are lucky enough to have sunny windowsills, you can grow herbs over winter. It is best to separate outdoor plants from your houseplants until you're sure that insects or mites haven't hitched a ride indoors on them.

An extra-deep windowsills or regular-depth windowsills widened with a table are ideal. Regular watering, fertilizing, and scouting for pests (aphids, probably) will be needed as the strength of the sunlight drops off rapidly. On cold nights, slip a piece of cardboard between your herbs and the glass window for further insulation. As the days get longer in the late winter and spring, even

in large pots will need lots of water as the sunny windowsill gets hotter.

Basil is very frost-sensitive. You can start basil seed, or you can root basil cuttings in water and then pot them up. If you have a healthy-looking plant in the ground, you can also dig it up in late summer and pot it with soilless mix. It's OK to leave the potted basil outdoors, well-watered, for a couple of weeks, but keep a close eye on night-time temperatures. You can also plant basil in large containers in late May. Plan ahead to make sure the pot fits on the windowsill or adjacent table. To harvest basil and maximize production, you should cut the plant back hard, by a third or even half, to encourage branching and regrowth, and to prevent flowering. It's OK to take a few leaves off now and then for a salad, but that will not encourage branching.

Rosemary is a tender perennial, with one variety, 'Arp', reputedly hardy to zone 6. It grows well in a large pot at least 1 gallon size or you needed to watch more closely for watering needs. Rosemary leaves resemble evergreen needles, and the leaves don't wilt when it needs water.

Stevia and Cuban oregano are tender perennial which can winter successfully on a windowsill.

Basil and rosemary plants can be purchased from plant vendors. Stevia and Cuban oregano plants may be harder to find, so ask local herb growers at the Farmers' Market or nursery.

Some hardy perennials can be grown on the windowsill, after a dormancy period, such as chives, garlic chives, and sage. Leave the container out to experience some cold weather and bring it in around Thanksgiving. Regrowth is rapid. Lemon balm may be treated the same way. Thyme is also worth trying with this treatment if you have the space.



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Parsley is a biennial that sometimes survives the winter outdoors with enough snow cover. It can take some cold weather in fall, but doesn't seem to need a cold treatment. If parsley got enough cold weather, it might 'think' it's the second year and time to bloom. Even without cold treatment, it will probably send up bloom stalks in late winter. Trim them off every time you see them, and keep harvesting the foliage. When spring comes, you could move your parsley outside, let it bloom, and try your hand at seed-saving as well.

What if you don't have a sunny windowsill? You could experiment with growing some herbs under fluorescent lights. Four-foot shop fixtures are inexpensive, and cool white fluorescent tubes will suffice (no need for expensive grow-lights). Use a timer and set it for 16 hours on, 8 hours off. Hang the fixture on chains so that you can easily adjust the height as the plants grow. The lights should be no more than 4 inches above the foliage for the best growth (two inches for seedlings). Either mirrors or aluminum foil covered cardboard can be used on the back or sides to reflect light back onto the plants. Fact sheet Low Cost Grow Light Frame Plans provides additional details. Find it at www.gardening.cornell.edu/vegetables



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Robison York State Herb Garden features over 500 plant varieties of herbs, or plants that have human use or significance. The herbs are uniquely arranged into 17 theme beds, including Herbs of the Ancients, Bee Herbs, Culinary Herbs, Dye Herbs, Edible Flowers, Economic Herbs, Fragrant Herbs, Herbs in Literature, Lavender, Medicinal Herbs, Herbs of Native Americans, Ornamental Herbs, Sacred Herbs, Salads and Potherbs, Savory Seed Herbs, Tea Herbs, and Tussie Mussies and Nosegays. In the garden, each plant is labeled with its common and scientific name, and its use.

<http://www.cornellbotanicgardens.org/our-gardens/botanical/herb-garden>