Culinary Herbs

Herbs can be annuals (basil), biennials (parsley), or perennials (thyme, chives, sage). Although most herbs prefer full sun, some will also do well in partial shade. Many herbs will tolerate a wide range of soil conditions as long as the soil is well-drained. Add organic matter to improve soil texture or grow herbs in raised beds. Most herbs do not need very fertile soil; in fact, over fertilization can result in plants with weak flavor. Generally, herbs prefer slightly acidic to neutral soil (pH 6-7).

The best time to harvest herbs is in the morning, just after the dew has dried. Leaves can be used fresh or can be dried or frozen for later use. Dry herb leaves in an area out of direct sunlight with good air circulation and low humidity. Tie bundles of stems together and hang upside down or spread fresh leaves on a fine mesh screen. Store dried leaves in a dark place. An easy way to freeze herbs is to mix chopped herbs with water in ice cube trays. A few of the most popular culinary herbs are highlighted here.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)
- easy to start from seed; start seeds indoors about six weeks before the last frost date or seed directly in garden after last frost date
- pinch back regularly above leaf nodes to promote the development of a bushy, compact plant and to prevent flowering; once flowers form, the plant produces less essential oil and the leaves are not as flavorful

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)
- propagate by cuttings
- prefers dry soil
- cut back once or twice during the growing season

Thyme (*Thymus* species)
- difficult to start from seed; propagate by root divisions or stem cuttings
- has a low moisture requirement once established
- best time to harvest is just before the plant blossoms or while the plant is in full bloom
- prune several times during the growing season; last pruning must be at least one month before first frost

Checklist for June

- Withhold lawn fertilizer until fall.
- Water lawns ½” every three days (at least 1” weekly if no rain).
- Mow grass at 3”; don’t cut more than 1/3 of leaf length at one cutting. Leave clippings on the lawn to add nitrogen to the soil.
- There is still time to plant seeds of quick-growing annuals and beans as well as seedlings of summer squash and cucumber outside.
- Ensure that all houseplant containers have drainage holes before putting outside.
- Remove spent flowers from peonies.
- Mulch everything to a depth of 3” to control weeds and to retain moisture.
- Check roses for black spot and powdery mildew and treat accordingly.
- Pick Japanese beetles by hand and drown in soapy water.
- Give chrysanthemums their last pinch of the season at month’s end.

Come to the Barnegat Bay Festival, Wannemaker Complex, Island Heights, June 6, 10 am to 4 pm, rain or shine. Free family event with local environmental exhibitors, crafts, food, live music, puppet shows, children's crafts and activities, pontoon boat rides and kayak tours on the Barnegat Bay!