



Barbara's Homegrown Larder

This month our regular columnist turns her attention to basil, a favourite summer herb which has a surprising range of varieties and uses



Basil flowers and foliage

I know it is frowned upon to have a favourite child but is it ok to have a favourite herb? If it is, then for me basil is that herb! It is that knock-out aromatic hit from the foliage that takes you straight to the Mediterranean, to a Greek taverna, or to an Italian kitchen, that just never fails.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) has a long roll call in folklore, culinary and medicinal uses, and today it is acknowledged as one the most distinctive culinary herbs, especially in Italian, French and Asian cuisines.

Basil leaves are best used freshly picked, so use as soon as you can after harvest. It can also be frozen in leaf form (for cooking rather than decorative purposes) or in made-up green sauces. Pesto is my product of choice from all the basil plants that I grow and I freeze it in ice-cube trays so I can use it all year round. A few years ago, I followed a suggestion from the late Rome-based cookery writer, Carla Tomasi, to freeze blitzed basil and olive oil into blocks and later use shards of it in sauces and casseroles, rather than taking it all the way to pesto. It is also quite a



Purple basil seedlings



Basil seedlings in the ground



Green and purple basil on sale



Young basil seedlings



African Blue Basil rooted cuttings

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lot of fun smashing it into shards too.

The leaves, whole or torn, combine well with tomatoes as a salad and they are the main ingredient of pesto sauce for pasta, and are also good with pizza, in chicken and lamb dishes.

Basil is a short-lived perennial, indigenous to warm and tropical regions of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, South America, India and the Middle East, but here in the UK it is grown as a half-hardy annual in temperate climates.

It grows to 45cm in height and a spread of 30cm depending on species.

There so many different types of basil to choose from. The leaves, varying in size and colour, ranging from large dark green to tiny, spring green, with purple, variegated and curly forms, are highly aromatic. The flowers may be pink, mauve or white and are also spicily fragrant.

O. basilicum 'Purpurascens' has purple leaves and pinkish flowers. 'Napolitano' has the largest green

leaves of all the basil, while *O. basilicum* 'Citriodorum' is lemon-scented and has green leaves and white flowers. Thai basil (*O. basilicum* 'Horapha'), with an aniseed flavour, is used in Asian cooking. But best of all, in my opinion, for the full flavour packed into its tiny leaves is Greek basil, with its small bushy shape and fresh green appearance.

My latest basil 'love' is for a variegated leaf form called 'Pesto' which tastes just like the green sauce I enjoy making.

'African Blue' is a perennial, woody basil that I absolutely love and which I manage to overwinter in the greenhouse regularly. I cannot stop propagating new plants from cuttings that I root in water, as I do mint cuttings. It has a strong flavour and just brushing the leaves, especially in winter, sends you off to a summer-time place.

I sow basil seed in spring into modules or pots in a warm greenhouse or propagator. I transplant the seedlings as soon as they large enough to handle. I usually grow basil in containers, but I do set mature seedlings out into my raised herb beds, in full sun, when all danger of frost has passed. It needs well-drained soil and in containers I make sure that they are well-watered, especially in dry conditions. I pinch out most of the flowering stems to keep the plants bushy and to allow for a succession of foliage for cutting. I do leave some stems to flower as the aromatic and colourful flowers offer extra spicy flavour and colour to salads. I use them for colour and flavour in so many ways including in ice cream. ■



Pots of basil and other herbs



Sweet basil

Variegated 'Pesto' basil
RIGHT: African Blue Basil

LEFT: Large leaf basil

Small-leaved Greek basil

Purple leaf basil