

## Herbs for the Landscape – Yard to Kitchen

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What defines an herb? It's a plant with leaves, seeds or blossoms that can be used for flavoring, food, medicine or perfume. Most of them have essential oils that leave a telltale fragrance when you rub their leaves.

For the most part, perennial herbs hardy in Nebraska are easy to grow. Their needs vary from full sun to part shade and from moist to dry soils. Growing them in containers or raised beds allows for more flexibility in how much moisture and/or drainage they receive but since these sites dry out quickly, mulching will help protect them from drying out. Here's a few of our favorite yard-to-kitchen herbs.



Calamint, *Calamintha*, grows into a compact mound 15-18" high. Its gray-green foliage is a popular ingredient in Italian cuisine for its distinctive flavor of mint and savory that complements garlic-based sauces, soups and stews. The dried leaves also make an appealing tea. It's a pollinator magnet with loads of tiny, airy white blooms in upright sprays from June until frost.

Chives, *Allium schoenoprasum*, has grass-like foliage that tastes of fresh onion useful in a wide range of dishes.

Tarragon, *Artemisia dracunculus*, is a woody perennial that will grow 2 feet high in full sun and rich, well-drained soil. It has a minty anise flavor useful for herbal vinegars and other uses.

Hyssop, *Hyssopus officinalis*, tastes like mint with a hint of lavender and a slight bitterness that lightens up vegetable and other dishes. It thrives in hot, dry summers under full sun. It has narrow, dark green leaves and spikes of small blue flowers in summer.

Lavender, *Lavandula* species can be used in everything from bath salts, soaps and lotions to scones and pound cake. To enjoy its fragrance year-round, dry and preserve it by hanging small blooming bunches upside down in a dark, dry room. For winter protection, it's best surrounded with tall plants and leaf fall.

Lemon Balm, *Melissa officinalis*, has wonderful lemon-scented foliage that can be used to flavor salads, fruit cups or herbal tea. It can be quite aggressive so is best planted in confined spaces in sun or part shade. Frequent pruning will encourage new, more fragrant, leaves and minimize spread.

Lovage, *Levisticum officinalis*, has sturdy stalks of flat-topped, yellow flowers up to 6 feet high in late spring, making it an excellent vertical addition to used just like celery in salads, soups, stews, frittatas, egg and potato salad. And if you like bloody Marys, the hollow stalk of lovage is perfect for them.

Mints, *Mentha* species, are very aggressive. To prevent spreading, plant them in containers, confined spaces or raised beds. They add a minty flavor to a wide range of dishes.

Oregano, *Origanum* species, grow 12-24 inches high and 10-20 inches high, and is a flavorful addition to Italian pastas and stews. It requires full sun and well-drained soil. Its loose clusters of small white flowers are a great nectar source for bees and butterflies.

Sage, *Salvia officinalis*, is an attractive low shrub with velvety, greyish green leaves. Frying it mellows its flavor; fried sage can be crumbled over a dish to heighten flavor at the last moment. It can also be added fresh to teas and drinks and fresh or dried to sauces, compound butters, meat marinades, pastries and breads.

Savory, *Satureja montana*, is a compact plant with dark green leaves and woody stems, growing to 15" high and needing protection from winter winds. The aromatic foliage has a strong peppery flavor. It's often paired with beans during cooking since adding salt can toughen the beans. Fresh or dried leaves can be used to infuse vinegar, make herb butters or steeped for tea.

Thyme, *Thymus vulgaris*, is a small, many-branched perennial shrub 12 inches and wide that adds a minty, somewhat peppery flavor to a variety of culinary dishes. Like lavender, it's best sheltered in mulch or leaf litter through the winter.

Bob Henrickson, [plantnebraska.org](http://plantnebraska.org)

CUTLINE: Calamint is a flavorful herb and beautiful mounding perennial herb that blooms June into September.