Do you enjoy dill pickles, sage turkey dressing, pizza sauce, spearmint gum, or cream cheese and chives? Those are just a few foods given flavor from culinary herbs. To have fresh herbs on hand, many people grow herbs on their windowsills or incorporate them into their gardens.

**Objective:**

Discuss practices used in growing herbs.

**Key Terms:**

- basil
- chives
- coriander
- culinary herbs
- dill
- fennel
- French tarragon
- garlic
- herb
- mint
- oregano
- parsley
- rosemary
- sage
- spice
- successive crops
- summer savory
- sweet marjoram
- thyme

**Herbs**

An **herb** is a plant grown for its culinary seasoning or medicinal use. Medicinal herbs may be woody, while culinary herbs are nonwoody. **Culinary herbs** are fresh or dried leaves used as food flavoring. Herbs differ from vegetables in that herbs are used in small amounts. A **spice** is a dried seed, fruit, bark, stem, leaf, or root of a plant used as a food additive for flavoring.

**CULINARY HERBS**

Culinary herbs are divided into four groups. They are annual, biennial, tender perennial, and hardy perennial.
Annual Herbs

Some annual herbs are basil, coriander (cilantro), dill, fennel, and summer savory.

Basil is easy to grow. It loves heat and is easily damaged by cold. It is propagated by seed or cuttings. Cuttings are taken in midsummer and root readily. Basil seeds require light for germination.

Coriander (cilantro) requires succession planting. It will bolt and set seed. Coriander is used in Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, South Asian, Latin American, Chinese, Southeast Asian, and African cuisine.

Dill is associated with cucumbers and pickling. Dill does well with direct seeding.

Fennel has an anise or licorice flavor. It is commonly used in Italian sausage. Sweet fennel is a sweet, leggy type.

Summer savory grows quickly from seed. It blends well with other herbs and is used with beans.

Biennial Herbs

Parsley is a popular biennial herb. It is extremely high in vitamins. Curled parsley is
generally used as a garnish. Flatleaf parsley, also called Italian parsley, is used for cooking. Parsley germinates slowly, and it is best to transplant it to the garden.

**Tender Perennial Herbs**

Two tender perennial herbs are rosemary and sweet marjoram. **Rosemary** varieties may be upright or prostrate. Cuttings root fairly easily. Its straight, woody stems can be used as skewers. **Sweet marjoram** is a very tender perennial. It is propagated by seed. The seedlings are fine and should be thinned to one plant. The plant becomes harder once it becomes established. It should be harvested regularly to inhibit flower development. It has a sweet aroma.

**Hardy Perennial Herbs**

Some herbs classified as hardy perennials are chives, French tarragon, garlic, mint, oregano, sage, and thyme. **Chives** are in the onion family. They are grown easily from seed and are harvested by snipping the leaves. Chives should be divided every three or four years. **French tarragon** does not set seeds and must be propagated by division or cuttings. It has a licorice flavor with a bite that negates fishy flavors. It is hardy as long as the crown is dry during the winter. **Garlic** is a perennial divided and grown like an annual. It is planted in the fall and harvested the following July. It can be stored for months in a dry, dark place. Remove the flower stalks to obtain larger bulbs. Harvest garlic while it is green, and let it dry on the ground.
Mint is available in many flavors. The best method of propagation is by asexual means. Peppermint cannot be grown from seed. Mint can become invasive.

Oregano is usually started from seed. Cuttings may be taken from selected plants, or the plants can be divided. Oregano is less hardy than other hardy perennials.

Sage is easy to grow from seed and is attractive. It should be pruned once a year. It is harvested until late summer.

Thyme is available in many varieties. It is grown from seed or cuttings. Mow thyme every few spring seasons to renew growth.

HERB PRODUCTION

Some herbs may be grown successfully indoors or outdoors. Herbs can be planted in a vegetable garden or mixed into landscape plantings.

Plan the Garden

The herb garden should be planned. Diagram the location of the different herbs in the planting area. Consider successive crops. **Successive crops** are crops that can be grown after one another so that the land is covered throughout the growing season. Fall crops can follow spring and summer crops in many areas. Adequate space should be allowed for cultivating and harvesting your crops.

Propagating Herbs

Many herbs are adapted to direct seeding in the garden. Some herbs, however, benefit if they are started in a greenhouse, hotbed, or cold frame and then transferred to the garden as transplants.
Many herbs are started from seed. Some, such as rosemary, thyme, and sage, do better if propagated by cuttings or division. Planting of each crop varies. Refer to seed guides to determine planting depth and spacing. To ensure good germination, seeds must be planted as directed.

**Soil Requirements**

Herbs do well in most soils. Soils that have high organic-matter content, are moderately fertile, and are well drained are best. Soil amendments, such as composted leaves, grass, and manure, should be worked into the soil to improve soil structure, soil drainage, and fertility. The soil should be tilled to loosen it and prepare it for planting. Large clumps of soil should be broken up, and the area should be leveled.

**Pest and Disease Management**

An integrated pest management program should be followed to keep insect pests and diseases in check. Cultivation as needed is often enough to keep weeds under control. Besides controlling weeds, cultivation aerates the soil.

In the northern part of the country, the most popular herbs have few pests.

Some people believe that herbs planted among vegetables will repel pests, but no scientific evidence supports this notion.

**Harvesting**

Harvesting is undertaken once a crop has matured and is ready for market. Harvesting should be done as soon as the crop is ready, in order to prolong shelf life and marketability.

**Hydroponics**

Hydroponic operations are sources of herbs. They can provide fresh herbs to consumers year round.

**RESOURCES FOR COMMERCIAL HERB PRODUCTION**

The resources needed for herb production vary depending on the specific crop. In general, a producer needs land, tillage and planting equipment, storage facilities, and a marketing outlet. An additional resource might be a hotbed, cold frame, or greenhouse in which to start seeds and seedlings.

**Growing Structures**

To take advantage of early marketing opportunities, a producer may use a hotbed, cold frame, or greenhouse to start some crops. Herbs started in one of these growing structures
could be ready for harvest and market two to three weeks earlier than those grown outside. Thus, they could command a premium price for those two to three weeks.

*Markets*

A predetermined market for the herbs grown is necessary for an herb production enterprise to be successful.

*Labor*

A source of labor may be needed for harvest. Herbs may be bruised or otherwise damaged during harvest, so harvesting by hand is the preferred method. Labor can come from family, local, or migrant sources. Each of these varies in cost and efficiency for the producer.

**FINANCIAL RETURNS**

Estimated financial returns for herbs vary, depending on the crop. The market price of herbs varies also, depending on the type of marketing.

Herbs may be sold fresh, dried, or as live plants. The primary customers are upscale restaurants and caterers. Herbs may also be marketed wholesale to large grocery chains. In low volumes, herbs may be marketed through local farmers’ markets. Herbs may also be marketed as value-added herbal products, such as herbal teas, butters, jellies, and sauces. Small-scale herb producers can realize returns in excess of $5,000 per acre.

**Summary:**

Culinary herbs are fresh or dried leaves used as food flavoring. They are classified as annual, biennial, tender perennial, and hardy perennial. Major culinary herbs include basil, chives, coriander, dill, fennel, French tarragon, garlic, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, summer savory, sweet marjoram, and thyme.

Culinary herbs can be grown as successive crops. Many herbs are adapted to direct seeding. Some herbs do better as transplants.

Well-drained soil with high organic-matter content and moderate fertility is best. An integrated pest management program should be followed to keep insect pests and diseases in check.
In general, a producer needs land, tillage and planting equipment, storage facilities, and a marketing outlet to produce herbs.

Estimated financial returns for herbs vary, depending on the crop. Herbs may be sold fresh, dried, or as live plants. Value-added herbal products are also a way to market herbs through herbal teas, butters, jellies, and sauces.

**Checking Your Knowledge:**

1. What are herbs, culinary herbs, and spices?
2. What are the major culinary herbs?
3. What growing conditions are best for herbs?
4. What resources are needed for commercial herb production?
5. What are the financial returns on herbs?

**Expanding Your Knowledge:**

Plant some herbs in your home garden or in some pots at home. Follow recommended growing procedures discussed in this unit. Harvest and enjoy.

**Web Links:**

- **Growing Herbs in the Home Garden**
  - [http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm](http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm)
  - [http://w3.aces.uiuc.edu/NRES/extension/factsheets/vc-44/VC-44.html](http://w3.aces.uiuc.edu/NRES/extension/factsheets/vc-44/VC-44.html)

- **Growing, Harvesting, and Using Culinary Herbs in the Home Garden**
  - [http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1612.html](http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/1612.html)

- **Growing Herbs for the Home Gardener**
  - [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8110.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8110.html)

- **Growing Herbs**

- **Agricultural Career Profiles**
  - [http://www.mycaert.com/career-profiles](http://www.mycaert.com/career-profiles)