

An Herb Society of America Fact Sheet



Basil

Culinary Types:

Ocimum basilicum (sweet basil)

O. xcitriodorum (lemon basil)

O. tenuiflorum (holy basil, tulsi)

Description

Basils belong to the *Lamiaceae* (formerly *Labiatae*), the mint family, and have the square stems, two-lipped flowers and abundant fragrance-bearing oil glands typical of many members of the mint family. The name *Ocimum basilicum* derives from the Greek *okimon* (smell) and *basilikon* (royal).

Basils of the *basilicum* species, which provides most of the culinary varieties, are extremely variable in height, leaf size, color and form. The herb has been in cultivation so long that numerous cultivars exist. Large-leaved green basils, known by such names as sweet basil, Italian basil, and lettuce-leaf basil, can grow 2 or 3 feet in height. Small-leaved green forms such as dwarf basil, bush basil, or 'Spicy Globe' will grow 8 to 12 inches in height and as broad. Reddish-purple variations such as 'Dark Opal' or 'Purple Ruffles' tend to be intermediate in size, bearing purple instead of white flowers. These variants of *O. basilicum* have minor nuances of flavor, and are used for the same purposes. Novelty basils, named for their fragrance connotations, have some culinary use and are worth taste testing for individual preferences; you may find plants offered as cinnamon, licorice or anise basils. *Ocimum xcitriodorum*, lemon basil, is a white-flowered, smaller-leaved plant with a pronounced lemon fragrance, producing less foliage than a large-leaved *Ocimum*. Holy basil, *O. tenuiflorum* (syn. *O. sanctum*), also called tulsi, is sacred in Hindu religious tradition and has been rarely used as culinary herb, but American cooks are beginning to experiment with it. The Thai basils that are now being imported seem to be representatives of several *Ocimum* species. Whatever species they may be, basils are a mainstay of Thai and Vietnamese food preparation.

Culture

Many of the culinary basils are tender annuals in most of the U.S. and Canada, though perennial in the warm temperate and tropical regions in which they originated. They are easily grown from seed, from cuttings which root quickly in water, or from purchased plants, providing the soil has warmed to 70°F, the day length is long enough, and the weather has settled (the nights are not below 55°F). Some non-seeding varieties like *Ocimum xcitriodorum* 'Lesbos' can only be propagated from cuttings. Basil should be pruned when it has three to five sets of true leaves to promote branching and maximize growth. For the first pruning, cut the

plant back to just above its second set of leaves. Material for freezing and drying or making oils, butters, pesto and vinegar should be cut throughout the summer from young leaves, since older leaves have less oil content and become tougher. Though basil is heat-loving and will grow strongly all summer, as soon as nights go below 50°F it shows signs of deterioration.

Uses

The flavor of fresh leaves is outstanding in salads (greens, tuna, potato, egg), with fresh or cooked tomatoes, with eggplant, peppers or zucchini, in marinades, as a sandwich garnish, and in the classic pesto sauce for pasta. Cooked briefly, it is a flavorful addition to soups, stews, and sauces. It works well with most other herbs. Large leaves can be torn, chopped or minced, and small leaves can be added whole to salads, vegetable dishes, pasta and rice. To insure best flavor, add to salads and cold dishes soon after cutting and to cooked dishes in the last few minutes of cooking.

Basil can be an ingredient in potpourri and scented beads, and the essential oils are used in perfumery. It is also used commercially as a flavoring agent in foods and pharmaceuticals, and has been used in traditional folk medicine in countries around the world.

See *Basil: An Herb Society of America Guide* for additional information on basil species, cultivars, cultivation, history and uses.

Bibliography

Basil: An Herb Society of America Guide. Kirtland, OH: The Herb Society of America, 2003.
Darrah, Helen H. *The Cultivated Basils*. Independence, MO: T.E. Thomas Buckeye Printing, 1980.
"A Special Issue on Basil." *The Journal of the Western Reserve Herb Society* VI (2) (Spring 1989).

© 1999, 2003 The Herb Society of America

Disclaimer: The Herb Society of America is a non-profit, educational organization dedicated to promoting the knowledge, use and delight of herbs through educational programs, research, and sharing the experience of members with the community. Since we are not medical practitioners, it is the policy of The Herb Society of America not to advise, recommend, or prescribe herbs for medicinal use. Information is provided as an educational service, and The Herb Society of America cannot be held liable for its content. Please consult a health care provider before pursuing any herbal treatments.