

The Herb Society of America

Essential Facts for Culinary Basils

Ocimum basilicum (sweet basil)

O. xcitriodorum (lemon basil)

O. tenuiflorum (holy basil, tulsi)



Ocimum xcitriodorum

Photo Wikimedia Commons/Kembangraps

History

Basil has been in cultivation so long that numerous cultivars exist.

Description

Basils belong to the Lamiaceae (formerly Labiatae) or mint family. They have the square stems, two-lipped flowers, opposite leaves, 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. 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,

Family: Lamiaceae (Labiatae)

Latin Name: *Ocimum basilicum*, *O. xcitriodorum*, *O. tenuiflorum*

Common Name: Sweet basil, lemon basil, holy basil

Growth: Tender annual or perennial in warmer climates

Hardiness: Locate in frost-free locations

Light: Full sun

Soil: Loose, porous, pH 4.3-9.1

Water: Moist, not saturated

Use: Culinary

Propagation: Cuttings, seeds

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, small-leaved plant with a pronounced lemon fragrance, producing less foliage than a large-leaved *Ocimum*.

Holy basil, *O. tenuiflorum*, also called tulsi, is sacred in Hindu religious tradition and has been rarely used as a

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.

Propagation

Basil is easily grown from seed, from cuttings which root quickly in water,



Ocimum tenuiflorum

Photo Forest & Kim Starr

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.

Uses

The flavor of the 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.



Various basil species
Photo HSA/Robin Siktberg



Ocimum basilicum var. *purpurescens*
Photo HSA/Robin Siktberg

Harvesting/Pruning

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.

Sources

Plant Information Online is a source of links to North American seed and nursery firms. It is a free service of the University of Minnesota Libraries.
<http://plantinfo.umn.edu>

Bibliography

"A Special Issue on Basil." *The Journal of the Western Reserve Herb Society* VI (2) (Spring 1989). © 1999, 2003 The Herb Society of America

Basil: An Herb Society of America Guide. Kirtland, OH: The Herb Society of America, 2003. ([Link to guide](#))

Darrah, Helen H. *The Cultivated Basils*. Independence, MO: T.E. Thomas Buckeye Printing, 1980.

Tucker, Arthur O. and Thomas DeBaggio. *The Big Book of Herbs*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2009.

Medicinal Disclaimer – It is the policy of The Herb Society of America not to advise or recommend herbs for medicinal or health use. This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be considered as a recommendation or an endorsement of any particular medical or health treatment.

Visit www.herbsociety.org for information on joining The Herb Society of America
9019 Kirtland Chardon Rd. Kirtland, Ohio 44094 440.256.0514, herbs@herbsociety.org

©2010 The Herb Society of America