

# Starting Your Medicinal Herb Garden

## 5 Herbs to Grow in Containers and Gardens

---

Creating a medicinal herb garden doesn't have to be complicated or overwhelming. Start with these 5 herbs - they are all easy to grow, offer you a variety of benefits, and have a long history of documented use for health and healing.

**Disclaimer - Please Note: the information provided here is not intended to replace professional medical advice and care. It is simply my perspective for you to consider as you make good choices for you and your family's health.**

**The use of herbs is a time - honored approach to strengthening the body and promoting health. Herbs, however, can trigger side effects and can interact with other herbs, supplements, or medications. Seek the support and care of a physician and/or complementary care practitioner you trust, and above all, listen to and trust in yourself. Be well!**

### Five Medicinal Herbs for Containers and Gardens

1. Yarrow
2. Comfrey
3. Thyme
4. Sage
5. Echinacea

### Yarrow - *Achillea millefolium*

#### Traditional Uses for Yarrow:

- Fresh, dried, or powdered, yarrow is excellent for cuts and scrapes to stop bleeding, prevent infection, and relieve pain
- Fresh or dried leaves and flowers can be used in tea for fevers
- Yarrow is a bitter plant and can be included in a homemade bitter tincture
- Can be used to make an oil-based skin salve (often combined with other herbs)
- Astringent quality of yarrow makes it useful in homemade skin toner recipes

### **How to Grow Yarrow:**

Yarrow is a flowering perennial that prefers full sun and well-drained soil. But yarrow is quite a hardy plant, and like most weeds, can thrive under a variety of conditions. If you don't want yarrow spreading, plant in pots.

Yarrow grows low to the ground with feather-like leaves, and produces stalks with compound umbel flowers. Yarrow doesn't require much care as it is tolerant of poor soils and drought. If growing in a pot, make sure to allow for good drainage and avoid over-watering.

There are a variety of yarrow cultivars in a multitude of colors including orange, red, pink, and yellow. Medicinally, it is the white-flowered *Achillea millefolium* species that offers the strongest benefits.

### **Comfrey - *Symphytum officinale***

Comfrey is a great addition to your home apothecary. Traditionally used topically to help with cuts and scrapes, as well as treating injuries to bones, ligaments, and tendons, comfrey makes an excellent addition to your herbal first aid kit.

Leaves can be used fresh or dried to make a poultice or compress. Dried comfrey leaves can be used to make a comfrey oil, and in a healing salve.

Comfrey is frequently referred to as "knit bone" because of its ability to speed the recovery of bone breaks.

\*Comfrey leaf and especially the roots contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids, which have been suspected of causing liver injury when consumed in large quantities - comfrey should only be used externally and not for extended periods of time.

### **How to Grow Comfrey:**

Comfrey is a beautiful perennial with large, broad leaves and delicate bell-shaped flowers. The two types of comfrey most frequently grown and sold are the common comfrey, (*Symphytum officinale*) and Russian comfrey (*Symphytum x uplandicum*). Russian comfrey is also called the Bocking 14 cultivar, and because it is a hybrid, has sterile seeds and can only be grown from root cuttings.

Comfrey grows best in USDA hardiness zones 3-9, but can be grown outside those zones. Comfrey typically grows two feet in height and can be just as wide, so plan for adequate space. Comfrey can be grown in full sun or partial shade, and because it has deep roots, can tolerate a wide variety of soil types including clay, sand, wet, and dry conditions.

Common comfrey spreads quickly and can be difficult to remove from your garden, which is why I recommend obtaining the Russian, or Bocking 14 variety, as it has sterile seeds. Comfrey can be successfully grown in pots, but will need a seasonal addition of a nitrogen-rich fertilizer.

Comfrey leaves grow quickly and can be harvested multiple times over a single season. Cut the plant back to two inches in height, and allow to regrow. Leave the comfrey uncut through the fall to allow the plant to re-build reserves for the winter season.

In addition to comfrey's medicinal qualities, it is often included in permaculture designs for its ability to contribute to soil fertility, provide nutrient-rich mulch, and attract beneficial insects. Amy at Tenth Acre Farm is a great resource for using [comfrey in your garden](#).

## Thyme - *Thymus Vulgaris*

Thyme is an herb with culinary, medicinal, and ornamental uses. Common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) and lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*) are both popular culinary varieties and offer many health benefits. Traditional uses and current research is looking at the following benefits of thyme:

- Antimicrobial properties
- Relief for fevers
- Sore throat relief
- Expectorant qualities for relieving coughs
- Bronchitis

Thyme has a long history of treating coughs. Dioscorides, an ancient Greek physician and pharmacologist, wrote of the healing benefits of thyme in his *Materia Medica*, a text that was widely read for nearly 1,500 years. Clinical studies are indicating the benefits of thyme (dried or extract) in treating bronchitis.

I use thyme medicinally as a simple tea or in my [honey-vinegar oxymel](#).

### How to Grow Thyme

Thyme is a perennial in USDA hardiness zones 5-9. Thyme does best in full sun and well-drained soil. It can be hard to grow from seeds because they have such uneven germination. If you do grow from seeds, start them indoors 6-10 weeks before the last spring frost date.

Thyme is a low-growing plant, and makes a nice border to gardens, walkways, or as a ground cover. Potted thyme can be enjoyed for its aroma. Attractive to pollinators and an evergreen plant, I believe thyme is underappreciated for its beauty and function in gardens, borders, and pots.

Once established, thyme requires little care except for seasonal pruning.

## Sage - *Salvia officinalis*

Sage is another culinary herb with a long history of use as both food and medicine. Current research shows an impressive range of possible medical applications.

Sage tea has traditionally been used in the treatment of colds and flu, and research suggests sage has significant antibacterial properties. (See resources for more information.)

Sage is often recommended to relieve cough and sore throats, and because sage has astringent properties, it's excellent for treating drippy sinus. Sage can be used as a tea, or as a gargle to soothe a sore throat.

In summary, historic uses and current research on Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) suggests the following benefits:

- antibacterial properties
- anti-inflammatory
- improvements in cholesterol and lipid profiles
- improvements in memory

Sage dries easily and stores well in an air-tight container. Sage remedies can be used in a variety of ways, including:

- Sage gargle for sore throat
- Sage tea
- [Sage-Infused honey](#)
- Sage as part of anti-bacterial herbal mouthwash
- Part of a nourishing herbal hair rinse

Sage is an important plant in our home apothecary, and is one of the first plants I use at the beginning of a cold. See my article - [Simple Foods for Cold and Flu](#) on how to use sage effectively for quick recovery from a cold or flu.

\*Avoid medicinal amounts if you are breast-feeding (slows lactation).

### How to Grow Sage:

Sage is another easy-to-grow plant for home gardeners, and does well in pots. If you live in zones 4-8, your sage will grow well as a hardy perennial. In other areas, you can take cuttings to continue indoors.

Sage prefers dry conditions, full sun, and well-drained soil. It often grows wider than its height, so for perennial sage, plan for at least 24 inches in width.

Sage needs to be pruned to promote new growth, but even with regular pruning, can become woody over time. After 2-3 years, I typically remove the old plant and start again.

Harvest sage only after the plant has become established. Sage dries quickly and stores well in an air-tight container.

## Echinacea - *Echinacea augustifolia*

Echinacea is the "rock star" of herbal medicine, enjoying a reputation for helping to prevent and shorten the common cold.

Evidence supports Echinacea's ability to stimulate the immune system, and research suggests Echinacea has substances that:

- Boost the immune system and shorten the common cold
- Relieve pain
- Reduce inflammation
- Provide Antiviral effects
- Provide Antibacterial effects

In addition, there is research supporting the use of Echinacea for:

- Urinary tract infections
- Cold sores from the Herpes Simplex Virus
- Slow healing wounds
- Inhibition of colon tumors
- Snake bites
- Spider and insect bites
- Eczema and inflammatory skin conditions

I include a tincture of Echinacea in our [first aid kit](#).

\*Contraindications:

Like most remedies, natural or man-made, Echinacea is not right for everyone.

Echinacea can interact with some medications, and should not be taken if you are on an immunosuppressant or if you are preparing for surgery.

For people with autoimmune disorders like Hashimoto's, celiac disease, and rheumatoid arthritis, using Echinacea may be harmful to their health. If you have or suspect you have an autoimmune condition, Echinacea is probably not for you.

### **How to Grow Echinacea:**

Echinacea, commonly known as the purple coneflower, is a perennial herb, native to the midwestern region of North America, and does well in zones 3-8. Echinacea is easy to grow from seeds, cuttings, and because it is so hardy, requires little to maintain it.

There are a number of Echinacea varieties, but generally the *Echinacea augustifolia* and *Echinacea purpurea* are considered the medicinal types, so check which you are purchasing.

Echinacea thrives in full sun, but will tolerate partial shade. Its deep roots help maintain it during dry periods, although periodic watering will help it to thrive.

The bright flowers will bloom all season, attracting butterflies and pollinators. The seed heads attract birds, particularly finches in the autumn. Echinacea is self-seeding, so as the original perennials begin to die after several years, they will be replaced by the new plants.

### **Where to purchase seeds and plants**

[Southern Exposure Seed Exchange](#) is a seed cooperative that offers high-quality seeds and plants.

I was fortunate and purchased my comfrey root plants from a local herb grower, but Comfrey root cuttings can be purchased online - There are a number of [Etsy sellers](#), but I cannot vouch for them. [Amazon](#) is another source for Russian comfrey root cuttings.

### **A Few References:**

- [Grieve's: A Modern Herbal - Comfrey](#)
- [Chemistry, Pharmacology, and Medicinal Properties of Sage](#)
- [Antibacterial Effect of Sage](#)
- [University of Maryland Medical Center Overview of Echinacea](#)
- Information on herbs - [drug interactions and contraindications](#)