

Growing Your Own

A beginner's guide to gardening

Basil

Basil is a flavorful herb that is easy to grow in pots or garden beds. It is a key part of Italian food, as well as Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian cuisines. Growing fresh basil can add great flavor to your meals for little cost.

Varieties

- **Genovese**, a common variety of sweet basil, is popular because of its very large leaves.
- **Kapoor Tulsi** (holy basil) is most often added to teas and used in the kitchen. It is also resistant to downy mildew.
- **Lemon** has slimmer leaves and a tangy citrus flavor.
- **Purple Ruffles** has dark purple leaves.
- **Sweet Thai** has slim leaves and a spicy flavor.

If downy mildew is a problem, consider disease-resistant varieties developed by Rutgers University.

How much to plant

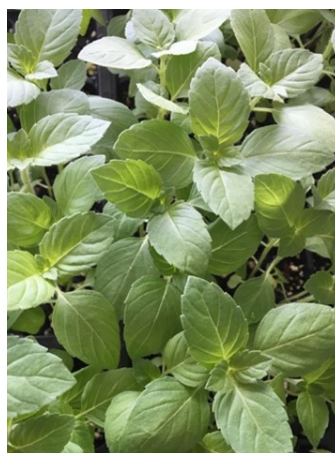
If you plan to harvest basil often during the growing season, plant three to five plants. If not, plant one or two plants.

How and when to plant

Basil needs full sun and well-draining soil. It will grow well in a garden, a raised bed, or a pot. If potted, choose a container at least eight inches across and eight inches deep. You can also grow basil indoors, but it will need very bright light. During the growing season, basil performs best outside.



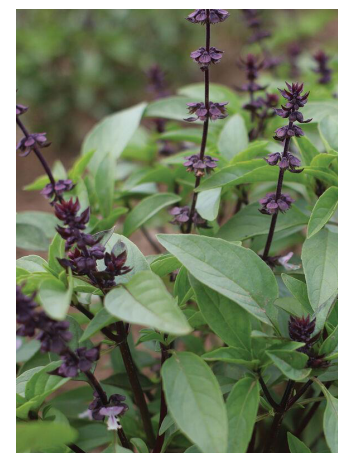
Genovese
Johnny's Selected Seeds



Kapoor Tulsi
Jann Knappage, University of Kentucky



Purple Ruffles
All-America Selections



Sweet Thai
Johnny's Selected Seeds

Basil does not handle frost well. You can plant basil seeds indoors four to six weeks before the earliest safe planting date. Or you can plant basil seeds or seedlings in the garden after the earliest safe planting date.

Basil seeds are very small. Plant seeds just under the soil, about one-eighth inch deep. Plant seeds two to four inches apart, and lightly cover with soil. Seedlings should start to break through the soil five to seven days after planting. Thin seedlings when they have at least two pairs of leaves, spacing plants six to 12 inches apart. Add the small seedlings that you thinned out to soups and salads. If planting transplants, space basil at least 12 inches apart.

Pests and diseases

Basil can be affected by a few pests and diseases. To avoid diseases such as downy mildew, don't crowd plants to allow good air flow. Water in the morning and only water at the base of the plant to keep the leaves dry. Plant disease-resistant varieties if needed.

Basil may get Japanese beetles. Remove them from leaves by hand and dispose of them.

If leaves appear diseased or affected by insects, prune off affected branches or leaves. You can remove many pests with a hard spray from a hose or when washing the leaves before eating.

Basil Planting	
Depth	1/8 inch
Spacing	Seeds 2–4 inches apart Transplants 12–18 inches apart
Safe Planting Dates	
Eastern Kentucky	May 15–Aug. 15
Central Kentucky	May 10–Aug. 20
Western Kentucky	May 1–Aug. 25



Basil leaves with downy mildew
Gerald Holmes, Strawberry Center, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Bugwood.org, CC BY-NC 3.0



Cut basil stems just above a set of leaves to harvest
Erika Olsen, University of Kentucky

Harvesting

You can harvest basil often during the growing season. To harvest, use a sharp knife or scissors. Cut off a section of branch just above a set of leaves. For large recipes like pesto, you can harvest up to a third of the plant at one time. Allow the plant to regrow for a few weeks before making a large harvest again.

Harvesting the stem tips will also make bushier plants and slow down flowering. When the plant flowers, the flavor of leaves can change. You may want to remove flowers as they form to help new leaves to form. Before the first frost in the fall, you can move potted basil indoors to stretch the season a few extra weeks.

Serving

Basil is a member of the mint family. While basil is high in potassium, it is mostly used as an herb to add flavor. It has a warm, sweet, spicy smell and a strong flavor, like licorice and cloves. The most common use is in tomato-based recipes. It is the main ingredient in classic pesto. Fresh basil is tasty in pastas, on pizza, or in omelets. It adds zest to almost any garden vegetable, such as summer squash or eggplant. It is a key ingredient for many delicious Thai and Vietnamese dishes. Basil is also often paired with strawberries or blackberries in desserts.



Pasta salad with basil pesto sauce, tomatoes, and mozzarella cheese, decorated with basil-leaf garnish

Storing

Basil does not store well in the refrigerator since it is sensitive to cold. Pick only the amount you will use within one or two days. Basil can keep for several days on the counter in a vase of water like cut flowers. You can also dry basil for long-term use. Before placing dried leaves in containers for storage, make sure the basil is as dry as possible. You can store dry herbs in the refrigerator or at room temperature. For more tips on growing, using, and storing basil and other culinary herbs, please see UK Cooperative Extension publication *Culinary Herbs* (HO-74) at <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/ho-74>.

Clean up

Basil leaves will turn black at the first frost, so harvest leaves before the first frost. Compost healthy plant material. Throw away any diseased plants.



Basil ready to flower

Jann Knappage, University of Kentucky

Summary

Varieties

There are many types of basil. Genovese, Purple Ruffles, Sweet Thai, Kapoor Tulsi (holy basil), and Lemon basil grow in Kentucky. Consider downy mildew-resistant varieties.

How much to plant?

One to two plants should provide enough leaves for cooking. Plant three to five plants if you want to store basil or make pesto.

How and when to plant?

Basil is a warm-weather plant that is sensitive to frost. Plant during safe dates, spacing plants at least 12 inches apart.

Pests and diseases

Basil is at risk to downy mildew and Japanese beetles. To lessen problems, water at the soil level, don't crowd plants, and choose disease-resistant varieties. Prune damaged leaves as needed.

Harvesting

You can harvest basil often. Snip off a branch just above a set of leaves.

Serving

Basil leaves add a sweet, spicy flavor to many dishes. You can use it fresh or dried.

Storing

Pick only what you want to use. Store at room temperature in a glass of water like cut flowers. You can dry basil for long-term storage.

Clean up

Harvest leftover leaves before the first frost. Pull out plants and compost or throw away.

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