

INTRODUCTION

Producing fresh herbs is an easy and worthwhile enterprise. The total UK market for fresh herbs grew by 124% from 2000-2005 and is now estimated to be worth £38 million. Around £4 million of that is generated from organic fresh herb material; however 90% of the organic herb material is currently imported. The increasing demand for fresh pot herbs produced in the UK reflects the growing trends in cooking and gardening.

PROPAGATION

There are three main methods used for propagating herbs.

1. From seed

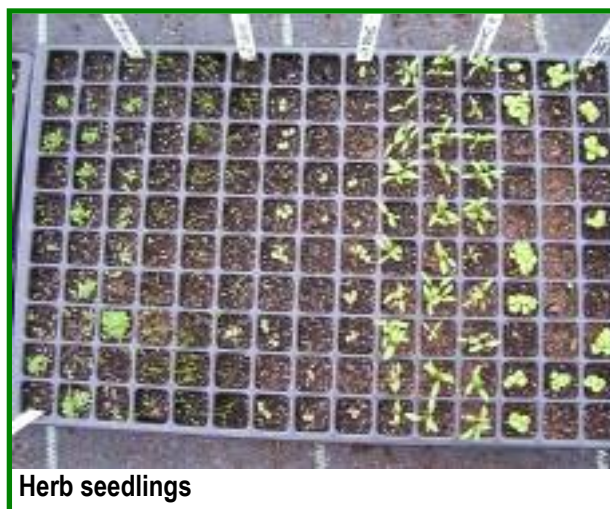
The production of herbs from seed is the most widely adopted propagation method and is potentially the most cost effective. There are many seed merchants and garden centres that stock a good range of herb seed.

2. Propagation by division

This is a popular method used for clump forming herbs such as chives, lemon balm and thyme. They can be lifted and divided in spring/autumn. This is a usefully way to produce stock and keep plants healthy.

3. From cuttings

Cuttings can be taken from the woody perennials such as rosemary and sage. Cuttings should be taken during late spring through to early autumn. Cut off approximately 7cm of shoot. Strip off leaves from the lower half of each cutting and push 3 cuttings around the edge of an 8cm pot filled with cutting compost. Once watered, place in the glass house/polytunnel.



Herb seedlings

VARIETIES OF HERBS

There is a wide variety of culinary herbs for growers to choose from. The most common include:

- Basil: - a very popular herb with medicinal as well as culinary uses. All varieties grow very well from seed and are widely available. *Ocimum basilicum* 'dark opal' and 'Genovese' are very popular. Harvest by picking the leaves and flowers throughout the summer.
- Mint: - a very successful herb, common all over Europe. Mints can be divided into 'classic mints', 'pepper mints' and 'spearmint'. Mint is best grown from root cuttings taken in autumn or early spring. Mint rust is the only major problem, if this occurs the plant must be dug up and destroyed. Harvest by picking the leaves before flowering.
- Thyme: - a very pretty herb with lots of scent and flavour. Thymes can be 'upright', 'creeping' or 'mounding'. Thyme can be picked all year round and dries very well. Thyme grows well from seed but requires careful watering as it does not like to be very wet.
- Chives: - a very well known member of the onion family. Chives grow well in containers, but require regular watering. Harvest throughout the growing season.
- Coriander: - an interesting herb as the seed and leaves have different flavours and the whole plant is edible. *Coriandrum sativum* is the most commonly grown as it grows well from seed. Leaves are harvested from late spring to late summer, they do not store well. Harvest seeds in summer onwards.

Depending on access to markets, there may be scope for growers to produce more exotic herbs for specific end user groups. Local market research is important to assess the best options for each producer.

Many herbs grown from seed will be ready for sale 6-10 weeks after germination but this is dependant on time of year, temperature and species.

GROWING MEDIA

Compost for herb production needs to be open, free draining and nutrient rich. ¹The Soil Association organic standards dictate that herbs grown in pots must be sold in growing media comprising at least 51% material derived from organic production systems.

POT SELECTION

Most herbs grow well in a range of pot types; however the size of plant required will influence pot choice. The containers need to accommodate sufficient growing media, provide good drainage and be sized to suit the plant at point of sale. Consideration should be given to the way the herbs will be presented at point of sale to ensure that the pots will be compatible with the final image.

PESTS AND DISEASES.

Pests and diseases need to be closely monitored, especially during propagation where high humidity conditions can increase the risk of pest attack. Pests like slugs and caterpillars need to be removed when first seen to limit damage to plants. In polytunnels and glass houses white fly and red spider mite can be controlled by introducing predators.

In the case of rusts acting quickly to remove infected parts will reduce the spread of the disease. Rusts can attack herbs like mint, chives and tarragon. The risk of diseases can be reduced by careful watering and temperature control.

MARKETING

Herbs sold in pots are easier to market and transport than cut herbs. Cutting herbs shortens the shelf life of the products and requires processing and packaging equipment which add time, labour and cost to production.

The way that potted herbs are presented to the customer will have a marked impact on their retail value. Investing a little extra time and money in attractive presentation and packaging can result in a significant increase in retail value.

A second Technical Note is being produced covering the economics and production techniques developed by the CALU Organic Welsh Herb project.



Six pack of herbs being prepared for sale

Notes:

¹ Soil Association Organic Standards. Version 15 April 2005 5.2.15/5.2.16