

INTRODUCTION

With the proliferation of TV chefs and a leaning towards more Mediterranean style home cooking, the market for fresh herbs is expanding. This is a relatively high value area of horticultural production which fits in well with other fresh produce, for example soft fruit and vegetables. Before commencing on a new venture, it is always worthwhile looking at how the new crops can fit in to your existing marketing strategy and activity in order to determine which new product lines will complement your existing product offer.

Herbs are a huge group varying from trees through bushy and herbaceous perennials right through annuals and half-hardy plants.

Table 1 shows the popular herbs for sales in Wales, along with their seasonality and longevity.

Table 1: Popular Herbs

Variety	Life habit	Seasonality
Sage	Bushy perennial	All year
Parsley	Annual/biennial	All year in mild areas
Thyme	Bushy perennial	All year
Rosemary	Bushy perennial	All year
Coriander	Annual	April-Oct
Mint	Herbaceous perennial	April-Oct
Basil	Half hardy annual	May-Sept*
Tarragon	Herbaceous perennial	April-Oct
Lavender	Bushy perennial	June-Aug
Fennel	Herbaceous perennial/annual	May-Oct
Horseradish	Herbaceous perennial (root used)	All year
Bay	Evergreen tree	All year mild areas
Lemon Grass	Tender grass	May Sept *

* best under protection

USES OF HERBS

The more traditional herbs such as sage, rosemary and thyme are associated with roasts, rosemary especially complementing Welsh Lamb.

More trendy newcomers are coriander, often used in Asian foods, and Basil which is an essential ingredient in many tomato dishes, in pesto and much other Mediterranean cookery.

Providing information on the use of the herbs helps consumers make purchasing decisions.

OUTLETS FOR HERBS

Herb marketing takes many forms. At its most simple, cut bunches of herbs can be offered for sale at farmers markets, farm shops and in box schemes. Supermarkets offer cut herbs in cellophane packs, often only containing a few grammes of product and retailing for a high price. However, this market requires significant capital investment in packaging equipment and cold storage areas. Supermarkets also demand high volumes and guaranteed continuity of supply. Another market for herbs is as pot plants for DIY herb gardens or as windowsill pots (this is covered in another CALU Technical Note).

As is usually the case, field grown herbs sold bunched and fresh are a far better product than the over packaged or pot forced option.

METHODS OF PRODUCTION

Parsley and coriander can be drilled alongside carrots and parsnips which are near relatives. However, coriander needs a continuity programme – e.g. drill every 2 weeks or on emergence of the last drilling. Parsley can be sown in spring and harvested 2-3 times or sown in August and over-wintered for early spring sales. Some growers, especially organic tend to sow parsley in modules to transplant. This is a good idea as the seeds often take a month to germinate so seedlings are easily lost to weeds in the field. The module can be planted out after 4-6 weeks, saving on the amount of time the crop is occupying field space. The same does not apply to coriander. This herb germinates much more

quickly than parsley and soon bolts into flower. Coriander bunches must be harvested before the crop flowers. After flowering, the plant is finished. Coriander will not take a transplanting check and so it is best to direct sow it.

Sage, Thyme and Rosemary are probably best grown through a polythene mulch. It is worthwhile to hunt down the best strains of these plants for your situation. Herbs sold by the cash and carries are often seed raised and are inferior to the proper cutting raised stocks. It may be necessary to buy from areas such as Evesham where there is a tradition of herb production.

In fields beds can be made up with specialist bed makers or you can improvise with potato ridging boards. The beds are then covered with a black polythene mulch or a woven polypropylene cover such as Mypex. Polythene will last up to 5 years, Mypex should last for at least 10 years. Plants are planted out through holes made in the membrane in late February – early March (or, if more convenient, October). The holes in the membrane must be kept small. Significant areas of these traditional herbs are grown. On large commercial farms the herbs are mechanically harvested and dried and specialist machinery is available.

Tarragon is also best grown through a polythene membrane. It is vital to source French tarragon as the Russian variety is an invasive weed with no flavour. French tarragon must be cutting grown. Tarragon is perennial but it is short-lived. Growers often take new cuttings in August or early September. These are wintered indoors before planting out early the following spring. Tarragon is a powerful herb, so only small bunches are offered.

Mint can be grown in open beds; running down them with a tractor gives a bed as the wheel marks become paths. Mint needs to be cut regularly to prevent it running to flower. A well-managed mint bed will last 2-3 seasons. Remember mint goes well with early potatoes.

Basil is a fashionable herb that can be grown as a bedding plant put out in May. However, it does much better in a glasshouse or tunnel. Basil goes especially well with tomatoes and smells good to attract the customers. Sow 3-5 seeds in a module or pot and germinate at 20°C, then grow on at 15°C to maximise production. If basil is to be grown outdoors, plant after the risk of frost has passed, or be prepared to cover with fleece.

Lavender is grown for flowers which are sold either fresh cut or dried. It is suited to Pick-Your-Own sales. There are many different varieties of lavender available and it is a very ornamental plant. Some farms, especially in East England, have specialised and only sell lavender flowers and products made with lavender oil.

Fennel is either grown like celery for its bulbous base or simply grown as a short term perennial where the feathery foliage is cut as it grows.

Dill growth habit is somewhere between that of fennel and coriander: it comes up quickly then bolts and dies. It is good for selling in bunches and goes well with fish.

Horseradish is a perennial in the cabbage family. Usually crowns are planted in ridges similar to potatoes to facilitate lifting. After a year the crop is lifted, planting stock reserved and the rest sold either as fresh product or better still made into horseradish sauce on the farm. The roots are used, finer roots are scrubbed and the coarse ones are peeled. This can be a very eye watering exercise.

Lemon grass is tender and will die in winter if not heated. Best grown in tunnels.

Bay grows as a tree or a hedge in mild areas. Now possible to widen the area where grown due to milder winters.

Herb gardens can be extremely attractive and help to draw the public to your farm. The bed should be laid out with imagination and preferably in close proximity to a farm shop.

There is little if any pest troubles on these crops so they would fall into the easier group for organic growing. Herbicides can be used on herbs but their use is outside the scope of this leaflet. Contact HDC on hdc@hdc.org.uk or look in the UK pesticide handbook produced annually by CABI publishing@cabi.org or the PSD website p.s.d.information@psd.gov.uk