

# WELCOME TO MY WORLD

**H**ERBS. DOZENS OF them. Thousands. Millions. *Trillions!* Well, maybe not *that* many. Still, they dominate the landscape in all four corners of the world. They adapt to the harshest climates and the most grueling conditions. They generate life-giving oxygen and remove deadly carbon dioxide from the atmosphere around us. They provide culinary treats and natural cures for diseases. They soften the skin and lessen the debilitation of old age. They fight cancer and can reduce a family's medical expenses. Some even produce beautiful, edible flowers!

But why on earth would anyone want to grow herbs *indoors*? They are, after all, the *outdoor* darlings of the plant world. They need sunlight and room—lots of room. They're difficult to grow under the best of conditions. And they're nearly impossible to keep healthy.

*Aren't they?*

Actually, herbs make *great* indoor additions to the human domicile. They are masters of environmental cleansing, which is extraordinarily good news since studies show that the most polluted air we breathe comes from *inside* our homes and not *out*. They grow well at home and at work under a wide variety of conditions. And recent studies have proven that potted plants improve your home and work environments by reducing your blood pressure, improving your attention span and productivity, lowering your anxiety levels,<sup>1</sup>

◀ A pot filled with herbs like this oregano can work wonders for any room in your home. PIXABAY

and lessening your chances for stroke, heart attacks, high blood pressure, and cancer.

Other research has demonstrated that working around plants—including herbs—leads to a higher degree of accuracy and better results in workplace performance. People exposed to the sensory-tickling properties of herbs actually enjoy 20 percent greater memory retention and improved ability to concentrate.

While most plants are adept at removing some pollution from our indoor air, scientists have discovered several that are better at removing volatile organic chemicals, or VOCs, than others. NASA was the first to prove that specific plants are useful in reducing pollution in sealed environments—such as a space capsule or the space station—by as much as 87 percent. Since then, numerous university and horticultural tech study groups have pinpointed the fantastically diverse effects of herbs on our lives.

For purposes of cleansing *your* indoor environment, NASA researchers suggest you use at least one potted plant per 100 square feet of home or office space for maximum air-purifying effect. That distills down to two large plants or several smaller ones for a spacious area such as a family room or a master bedroom en-suite. Some taller herbs and many “wanderers” can indeed take up a lot of space, but they don’t have to. Many species are compact enough for a small-to-medium-sized pot, and numerous herbs enjoy being planted together in a single pot—either with other herbs or with your non-herbaceous houseplants such as *Ficus benjamina* or *Schefflera*. That makes herbs ideal companion plants in foyers, stairwells, homes with open floorplans, near windows, and beneath skylights.

And when it comes time for moving your herbs around (to give them more light in winter, for example), even the most substantial planted containers are a cinch to transport if you put them on rolling trivets. Placed beneath even a monster of a container, trivets make relocating plants simple.

How do I know? I’ve been growing herbs indoors for the better part of four decades. I wouldn’t dream of living *anywhere* that didn’t

boast a dozen or more of these foliar marvels sharing my family's space. All plants have something to offer. They make us feel good; bring a piece of the outdoors in; cleanse and oxygenate the air we breathe; create dramatic decorating details, and change with the seasons. As a bonus, they help increase our cognitive reasoning, stretch our memories, and kick our immune systems up a notch or two. I haven't had the flu or even a common cold in a dozen years now. (Knock on Italian parsley!)

The sheer beauty of herbs can create a central focal point in a room and perk us up while we slave away at our computers. As far as the dramatic effect on your décor, forget that painting or mirror. Move in a companion planting of *Dracaena marginata* with horsetail, trailing thyme, or curly basil, instead. Or perhaps interplant a Norfolk Island pine with a carpet of soft sage beneath its beautiful, weeping boughs. Or companion-plant some French lavender with a *Ficus* in the bedroom for a relaxing night's sleep.

But the number-one advantage to growing herbs indoors is the number-one reason behind nearly *everything* we do in life.

## HERBS FOR HEALTH

Surrounding yourself with healthful herbs is not only physically beneficial but also emotionally stimulating, calming, soothing, and sedating. In fact, a pot filled with lush, bushy herbs is so healthful to humans that cutting-edge hospital and medical facility design teams are beginning to incorporate herbs and other plants into their fundamental architectural concepts. Institutional designers have found that walls of spreading thyme cut down on sound pollution while contributing to shorter hospital stays and fewer medical complications for their patients, resulting in lower patient costs.<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons is that all plants produce a radical change in the molecular structure of the air around us. Since most people spend far more time inside than out, it makes sense to surround ourselves with these miracles of molecular transmogrification.

Herbs offer yet another health benefit that has only recently come to light: they act as some of the world's most efficient and effective humidifiers, turning the driest, least healthy of rooms into the most hospitable of human habitats. As a bonus, they produce none of the potentially deadly pathogens of costly conventional humidification systems.

And that's only the beginning!

At the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, researchers are working on developing the best strategies for impacting human health and happiness. They concentrate on plants in and around the home to increase positive mental attitude (PMA) and reduce human aggression. They have uncovered how rational planting can strengthen the welfare of the community and enhance the individual's ability to cope with various physical and mental diseases and illnesses via increased immunity, vitality, attention span, self-control, and capacity for learning.

At the same time, new studies are showing how herbs in the home environment can significantly reduce attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other human diseases. Several studies suggest that herbs added to the decorative plants already in our homes reduce the incidence and severity of domestic violence.<sup>3</sup>

Studies conducted at the Rodale Institute, the Plants for Human Health Institute, the University of Minnesota's Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives Institute, NC State University's Plants for Human Health Institute, and other research facilities are also yielding promising findings with the correlation of herbs to human wellness. Not only in the home but also in our schools, churches, and workplaces—in fact, wherever groups of people congregate.

Yet another way plants can aid the environment is through gaseous exchange. Plants naturally take in carbon dioxide and give off oxygen as part of their photosynthesis and respiratory processes. Carbon dioxide is poisonous to humans and other mammals and is a leading contributor to global warming. And with worldwide CO<sub>2</sub> emissions reaching an all-time high, according to a May 2019

published report by the Scripps Institution,<sup>4</sup> surrounding ourselves with plants that exchange life-sustaining oxygen for harmful CO<sub>2</sub> is more important than ever.

So, if you're looking for a single word that sums up all of the *reasons* for growing herbs indoors, sorry. I can't help you. But if you're looking for the most critical *rationale* for growing these age-old wonders of the plant world inside your home, I can sum it up in three simple words: *For your health!*

### AND THAT'S NOT ALL

Health is a critical reason for growing herbs around your home, but it's far from the only one. As with most people, my journey into the wonderful world of herbs didn't begin in a doctor's office; it started in a kitchen. My first encounter with herbs came when, as a picky eater, I grew frustrated with my mother's cooking. For some reason, pig's knuckles and calves' brains simply didn't hold much appeal for me. Finally, after months of grousing, I sensed I was wearing the woman down. In short, I drove her to give me an ultimatum: *Either eat what I make or cook for yourself!*

Now, to most male children sitting smugly at the top of their eighth-grade food chain, such an ultimatum would have been a disaster. But to me, it was the word of the Lord passed down from heaven. After all, if Chef Boyardee could boil up some noodles smothered in ketchup before serving them up to a hungry teenager, why couldn't I? As the future Marinara King of South Campbell Avenue, I picked up the gauntlet and set about showing mom, and the rest of the world, that I was perfectly capable of doing just that. And I never looked back.

Of course, my first attempts at producing that savory, nose-tingling sauce *Italiano* were dismal failures. Too bland, too unsavory, too thin, and barely a tingle. That's when I began paying attention to how the mothers of my Italian friends cooked. Lots of ripe tomatoes. *Handfuls* of fresh herbs. A healthy drizzle of olive oil. And some slow-cooked beef, pork, and veal for substance. Oh, and Chianti. Lots and



▲ Cooking a meal like this is a whole lot easier when you have the right herbs at your fingertips! PIXABAY

lots of Chianti, some of which actually made its way into the sauce!

About the same time, I also discovered a weekly television show called *The French Chef* starring Julia Child. It was on PBS television every Saturday morning, and I took to Ms. Child over the airwaves as I would decades later while doing an interview with her in her Cambridge, Massachusetts, kitchen. Both she and my recently adopted “mom,” Anne Romagnoli of Chicago’s Italo-American Accordion Manufacturing Company renown, skyrocketed to a vaulted position of loftiness in my life. Thanks to them, I learned that thyme improves the taste of pork; cilantro improves the taste of chili; sage improves the taste of roast duck, and basil improves the taste of damned near everything.

Of course, merely possessing all this newfound knowledge wasn't enough to stir me to action as a culinary entrepreneur. Still missing was some hands-on experience. So, as time went by, I found myself spending as many hours in a small Italian delicatessen on Chicago's Near North Side as most kids my age did riding their bicycles or playing ball. Italian cheeses, espresso, salamis, cannoli, and fresh herbs and vegetables tickled my nose whenever I walked through the door, and these became my new marching orders through life. Cooking grew to become a challenge I could no longer ignore, and doing it correctly became my fetish.

So, while I cooked my way through high school, college, and my first marriage (there's a related backstory here that I'm not going to get into now, but ask me about it sometime), I learned not only how to select fresh herbs for the finest, tastiest additions to my culinary preparations, but also how to grow them myself. In fact, except for a Swedish ivy and a spider plant, herbs were among my earliest gardening triumphs. They were readily available (either from seed or as plantlets), easy to transplant into nearly any pot or container, simple to keep alive, and always available for plucking and adding to that evening's sauce, soup, or stew. They were also remarkably resistant to insect attacks and disease. Who could ask for anything more?

I soon found myself experimenting with herbs and other forms of ingestible greenery. Imagine my surprise, for example, while tromping around a trout stream outside Blue Mounds, Wisconsin (where I had recently moved from Chicago to claim my little piece of heaven), when I discovered something growing wild and smelling a lot like crushed mint, which is precisely what it was. With the running of the Kentucky Derby fast approaching, I threw together a few invitations, harvested some wild mint, and prepared for a Derby Day featuring the tastiest juleps anyone ever downed.

And when I learned that both herbs and other botanicals can be steeped in alcohol to create that favorite concoction of W.C. Fields known as gin, I had to try it. I've been concocting my own house brand, *Ragged around the Edges*, ever since.



▲ Preparing to make the evening meal is more fun when you have fresh herbs at your fingertips. PIXABAY

Of course, you don't have to be an alcoholic or even an aspiring lush to partake of your favorite herbs in liquid form. Many are delicious and nourishing when steeped in hot water as an herbal tea, and they're especially tasty when added to lemonade and other warm-weather concoctions. And you've never really lived if you haven't tasted hot cocoa with a sprig or two of freshly cut mint on a cold winter's night.

I was fortunate in those early days of my escape from Metropolis to have purchased 40 acres of land filled with dense woods, open fields, a pasture, and a stream running just downhill from my house. What I couldn't find growing wild anywhere around my property I bought and planted around the house. Borage. Sage. Savory. And when winter threatened to ruin everything, I harvested the remaining greens plus all the oregano, basil, and thyme my arms could carry, brought them into the house, and dried them in front of the fireplace for use that winter.

Then I discovered the beauty of growing herbs in pots. It began with a tiny potted mint plant that I bought on sale for \$1.25, and it turned my life around—but not without first demonizing it for a couple of years. I was so enamored with my newfound treasure that I promptly transplanted it into the garden, watered it well, and was thrilled when a volunteer plant popped up next to it. *I had two!* And then another. *Three!* And another. And still more.

By the time a year had passed, I had thrown every trick in the book at eradicating the mint that had taken over the garden. I tried poisoning it, pulling it, killing off the plants beneath a heavy black plastic tarp, tilling it up, and spraying it with a solution of vinegar and water. And they all worked—for a while. Then, as if by magic (“black” magic), another few mint plants sprouted. Some had actually grown out into the lawn, threatening to take over my beloved blue fescue.

Six months later, through sheer diligence and determination (I outlasted the little devils), the digging paid off. The key was not merely to remove the parent plants but to extract the underground rhizomes by which mint spreads. The garden was an eyesore by the





◀ Potted herbs make every aspect of cooking and meal preparation easier. PIXABAY

time I'd finished, and the lawn looked like an infestation of gophers had christened it "mecca." But, today, the only mint I have growing anywhere within a hundred yards of my property is in pots. Even then, I have to be ever vigilant that the mint doesn't trail down the side and establish a volunteer plantlet in the ground.

By the time I'd survived my mint infestation, I had left my home in Wisconsin and resettled in the high Rocky Mountain altitude of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where the growing season runs approximately from July 1 to July 3. The entire rest of the year, so far as gardening goes, is "dicey." So, that's when I began planting all my herbs in pots and bringing them in at the first sign of frost. In that way, I have had the same parsley, basil, and sage plants for years. I often move the pots back outside when the weather warms again in spring just to give myself a little extra breathing room in my solarium.

Now—vagabond that I am—I hang my hat in the high desert plateau of southern Utah where the winters are comparatively mild. Still, I have to bring some of my more sensitive herbs, like basil and tarragon, indoors for the winter (along with some other "annuals" such as tomatoes and peppers) if I want to carry the plants over to the following year. Many of my other herbs, including chicory (I know, I know,

it's not *really* an herb, but I use it as one anyway), sage, rosemary, and oregano, are permanent residents in pots left outdoors over winter.

The bottom line is that, since moving to Utah, I've enjoyed my herbs so much that I actually planted a real, live herb garden—you know, the way some people plant annual flower gardens or perennial plots—with a combination of in-ground and potted herbs, the latter of which I can easily move indoors. I also have several south-facing window boxes that make an excellent home for sun-loving herbs, including rosemary, sage, basil, thyme, marjoram, chives, dill, and cilantro.

The results? I'm in hog—make that *herb*—heaven. I never have to walk farther than four or five steps from my kitchen sink to harvest all the herbs I'm going to need for that evening's meal, and I'm never without a rich foliar complement outside my office window to greet me as the sun comes up each morning.

Herbs in the garden? I wouldn't be without them. Herbs indoors? They can't be beaten. Mixing and matching the two? It's the best of both worlds.

So, what are we waiting for? Let's get started.

