

UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Culinary Herbs

Introduction

Culinary herbs are fresh or dried leaves used as a food flavoring. There are literally hundreds of plants that can be grown for this purpose. Some of the more popular commercially grown herbs include basil, cilantro, chives, dill, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, and thyme.

Marketing

Culinary herbs may be sold fresh, dried, and as live plants. Potential fresh herb growers should talk to upscale restaurant chefs, caterers, or to produce brokers, especially those who sell to restaurants. Kentucky restaurants surveyed in 2006 indicated they were most interested in sourcing basil, chives, cilantro, parsley, and rosemary from local growers. Other herbs of specific interest to restaurants include horseradish, oregano, parsley, sage, tarragon, and thyme.

Kentucky producers have recently had success in marketing greenhouse-grown herbs wholesale to major grocery chains. Chefs purchasing fresh herbs will need to be guaranteed a daily supply of quality herbs throughout the year. In addition, fresh cut herbs may be sold to gift shops and natural food stores.

Herbs are also excellent for early and late season sales at farmers markets; however only low volumes can be moved this way. Direct marketing through roadside stands is also a possibility.

Value-added products, such as herbal teas, butter, jellies, sauces and wreaths are another way to



BASIL

market herbs. Displaying recipes with fresh-cut or live herbs can also help promote the sale of these crops.

Live herb plants are often promoted as “edible landscaping.” Possible outlets include farmers markets, local garden centers, landscape contractors, discount stores, grocery stores and roadside stands.

Market Outlook

Current consumer demand for herbs and herb products is high, as is the interest in natural, organically grown products. In addition, the market for ethnic herbs, such as cilantro, is expanding. Wholesale market channels are often more difficult to access than direct markets; however, some Kentucky producers have gained access to regional wholesale markets because of superior product quality.

Providing a fresh herb when no one else does is one key to successful marketing. Off-season production may mean the use of row covers, tunnels, or greenhouses to extend the season. Another key is

providing a fresher product than the one currently available. For example, field-grown fresh cilantro from California is commonly available at our local supermarkets; however, the quality is reduced by the three-day shipment from out of state. Local growers could successfully compete for this market by providing a fresh, consistent supply of this herb.

In general, herbs are part of a specialized niche market that may take some time to develop. Growers find that they spend more time marketing their product than actually producing it. Producers are cautioned against entering herb production as their primary business, but instead should consider beginning small and expanding only as the market expands. Success will be limited to those individuals that are really committed to the production and marketing of herbs.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

FIELD-GROWN

Specific cultural requirements do vary depending on the herb. However, as a rule, herbs are easy to grow, tolerating a wide range of soils and growing conditions. Generally, select a warm, sunny site with good soil drainage and few weed problems.

Raised beds with plastic mulch and drip irrigation increases yields and produces a cleaner product. Some herbs can be direct-seeded, while others should be transplanted. The use of row covers or tunnels can help extend the season.

GREENHOUSE-GROWN

Herbs can also be grown in the soil floor of a small or large greenhouse. Grow plants in soil just as you would in a garden or field by sowing seeds directly into rows or beds. Drip irrigation greatly reduces splashed soil so the leaves are easier to clean. Plants can also be grown in typical greenhouse bedding plant/vegetable transplant trays.

Some herbs may be adapted to the tobacco greenhouse float system, and could possibly be

grown on protected outdoor float beds as well. While University of Kentucky trials showed cilantro did not perform well in a float bed system, it did well on a constant water table mat sub-irrigation system. Growing herbs hydroponically eliminates the need for washing after harvest; however, hydroponic production is difficult to do organically.



CILANTRO

Pest management

Few pesticides are available for use on herbs and fewer still for those produced organically. Preventative pest management practices, such as a good Integrated Pest Management program, are the main means of disease and insect control. Following good cultural practices, such as proper crop rotations and sanitation, is essential in minimizing losses due to pest problems. Weed control in beds is accomplished through hand hoeing and mechanical cultivation.

Harvest and storage

The proper stage of harvest will depend upon a number of factors, including the type of herb and market. Herbs are hand-harvested and then washed, weighed and packaged. Hydroponic plants are generally harvested and shipped with the roots intact for longer post-harvest life. Plants are often packaged individually in plastic bags and then boxed as the market requires. Excess fresh herbs can be dried and stored until marketed.

Labor requirements

Herb production is labor intensive because

these crops are planted and harvested by hand. Labor is needed for seed sowing, transplanting, harvest, packaging and shipping. The harvest and packaging process can be especially time-consuming.

Economic Considerations

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of plants or seeds, and installation of an irrigation system. Growers planning to market dried herbs will need an on-farm drying facility. A considerable investment may be needed in order to obtain experienced laborers for herb production; training workers for harvest and packaging may also be required.

Culinary herb production can result in significant returns to the owner's land, labor and investment. Profitability, however, will be dependent on product quality and market. For well-managed, small-scale, direct-market herb production, producers could generate returns to land, labor and management in excess of \$5,000 per acre. Greenhouse production of herbs, depending on the crop produced, can potentially generate significantly greater profits but requires significantly more investment.

More Information

- Culinary Herbs, HO-74 (University of Kentucky, 2005)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ho/ho74/ho74.pdf>
- Greenhouse Production of Garlic Chives and Cilantro (University of Kentucky, 1996)
<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/proceedings1996/V3-594.html>
- RAFT System for Vegetables: Cilantro (University of Kentucky)
http://www.uky.edu/Ag/Horticulture/anderson/raft_veg/cilant.htm
- Selected Internet Resources for Herb Marketing (University of Kentucky, 2005)
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/herbmarketing.pdf>
- Herbs: Organic Greenhouse Production (ATTRA, 2005)
<http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/gh-herbhold.html>
- Herb Production in Organic Systems (ATTRA, 2005)
<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/om-herb.html>
- International Herb Association
<http://www.iherb.org>