

Basil

Needs warmth to produce a good crop of leaves and that mouth-watering scent.

Basil is an essential flavouring in a tomato salad, a pasta dish or a Thai stir fry, and reputedly staves off flea and midge attacks. Start sowing in May.

This tropical plant has 64 recognised species. It probably originated in Africa, Mexico and the Far East, but has been grown in India and the Mediterranean for thousands of years. In India, it has played an important part in religious ceremonies and social occasions, but not in the cuisine: at a wedding, the bride's parents would present their new son-in-law with a leaf of *Ocimum basilicum* 'tenuiflorum' [Holy basil].

Although basil has had many religious and medicinal uses over the centuries, it's only in the last two or three hundred years that it's featured on our menus. Did it only make its breakthrough when Europeans started eating tomatoes?

Whatever the reason, basil is now one of our favourite herbs and when choosing which variety to sow or buy, be sure it'll provide the scent and flavour you want and that it will add a dash of colour to the conservatory. Sweet or Genoese basil, with its fulsome green leaves and white flowers, is by far the most popular and is, as the cookery writer Claudia Roden describes, the tomato's "soul mate". On the other hand, Cinnamon Basil with pink-mauve flowers, dark purple-brown stems and serrated leaves has the spicy, cinnamon flavour that's ideal for a stir fry. Lemon basil is just the ticket if you make herb vinegars or are preparing a fish dish.

The strongly flavoured Thai basil, *Ocimum basilicum* 'Orapha Nanum', naturally features highly in Thai and Vietnamese dishes. With mulberry-purple flowers, dark brown stems and an attractive strong scent, it's well worth growing simply for decoration, as are many other varieties. How could you resist the mix of colour, texture and scent that basil plants provide? 'Dark Opal' or 'African Blue' with purple green foliage and purple flowers, are the perfect candidates for a container, though their flavour is too strong for the kitchen. Be sure to gently stroke the leaves to enjoy their scent!

Basil unquestionably brightens up the conservatory, greenhouse, window sill and our palates. It is perfectly possible to grow lots of varieties in Scotland and good seedsmen should offer a decent choice: with 18 different varieties, Suffolk Herbs are ahead of the game. The key when sowing and growing basil is to respect its tropical, not tougher Mediterranean, origins - like coriander, it needs cossetting to survive in our chillier world.

By sowing now, the herb will be in peak production at the same time as your tomatoes. When sowing, use fine compost, tamp down firmly to remove any holes that could swallow up a seed, and water with a fine rose. Thinly sow a small pinch of seed, covering with a tiny scattering of dry compost and a layer of perlite. Place a cover on top and don't water till after germination. All of this should prevent the seedlings from 'damping off'. When kept wet, basil is susceptible to fungal attack that will destroy the roots or stems of the emerging seedling, and these fungi will continue to threaten the growing plant. It needs free-draining compost; the roots should never be exposed to standing water, so any saucer should be emptied after watering. It's also essential to water in the morning, not at the end of the day as this will prevent any moisture from staying on the leaves or stems overnight, thereby providing ideal conditions for fungal attack.

The seeds germinate quickly – within 5-10 days - and once the first true leaves begin to appear, prick out into a small pot with good, free-draining compost. It's also important that the compost should be peat-free, not just because of the environmental damage caused by peat extraction, but basil cannot cope with peat's moisture retaining quality. The plant is moved on to a larger, final pot after about a month.

Temperature is also critical for this tropical plant. Basil should be sown in a propagator set to 20°C and is best kept in a greenhouse, a conservatory or on a window sill because it can't cope with night temperatures below 13°C. Most of the tender and half-hardy herbs we grow can handle our summers, with help, but basil won't usually thrive outdoors. You'll get away with it if you have a sheltered, sunny patio and decent weather in July and August. The walls of the house should store enough heat during the day to provide some protection at night, but if the mercury is set to fall below 13°C, bring the basil indoors. Even in the sun-drenched Mediterranean, basil is normally grown in pots, but it's essential in our less than balmy Scotland.

Wherever you grow this beauty, make the most of its colour, scent and flavour.