

It's a great time of year to plant herbs which also brings us to the annual printing of Fay Linger's famous Rosemary Jelly recipe. But first a few words on vegetables. Preschoolers from North Kitsap Parks and Rec planted sunflowers, bush beans, bush peas, alyssum, nasturtiums, and corn at the Raab Park Youth Garden in Poulsbo. That was on May 4 and 5. In less than two weeks all of the seeds have sprouted. Isn't that amazing? If you haven't planted seeds in your garden yet, there's still time. We are having ideal temperatures and just the right amount of rain. Start planting.

Lately, when I'm not in my garden, I've been luxuriating in the wise and very readable words of Mary Preus in her new book "The Northwest Herb Lover's Handbook." Many remember Mary and Silverbay Herb Farm in Tracyton. Her book takes readers step by step through every aspect of herb growing. You can find Mary's book at local bookstores and I'm sure the Kitsap Regional libraries have copies to check out.

Try adding herbs to your gardens. Challenge your imagination. You can grow herbs in pots, mingle them in with your flowers and vegetables, or design and plant a formal knot garden. Mary provides herb lists and describes twelve different theme plantings. Interspersed throughout the handbook are recipes and tips on harvesting, preparing, freezing, drying and preserving herbs.

Preus lists herbs suitable for four kinds of growing conditions. Plants for hot and dry areas are: Bay tree, Echinacea, Lemon Balm, Monarda, Rugosa Rose, and St. John's Wort. For full shade try: Chervil, Sweet Woodruff, Watercress and Wild Ginger. In partial shade plant: Arugula, Borage, Catnip, Comfrey, Elder, Feverfew, Horseradish, Nasturtium, Nettle, Salad Burnet, Sorrel, Valerian, Viola and Watercress. In moist areas Mary recommends: Chervil, Catnip, Comfrey, Elder, Lovage, Mints, Monarda, Nettle, Parsley, Sorrel, Sweet Woodruff, Valerian, Viola, Watercress and Wild Ginger. These herbs are ideal for the conditions she's recommended but many do well in other growing conditions. I've happily discovered that Violas and Nasturtiums often grow well in sandy sun-drenched soil.

Walk through your favorite nursery to touch and smell all the herbs you can find. It will help in deciding which ones you'd like to incorporate into your gardens. All good nurseries have their herbs displayed in areas of light where herbs thrive. Notice if the pots are grouped in sun, shade or partial shade. Remember to read the label the plant growers provide. Feel if the herb has square stems. Most square-stemmed plants grow like weeds. Mints grow profusely. Perform a square-stem-check on non-herb perennials too. Those with square stems usually grow exponentially throughout your garden, each year moving forth and conquering. Limit the situation by leaving the plant in its plastic pot and sinking it into the soil in your garden. This inhibits root spread. However, a plant can still reseed itself (lemon balm and valerian do this); at least you can control its expansion a bit. You can plant square stemmed plants in large containers on decks and patios. Even though square stemmed plants often become invasive they are always easy to grow adding abundant color and texture to a garden. They'll greatly attract pollinators – butterflies and bees in particular. Last but not least you can share them with friends.

My favorite woody herbs are rosemary, lavender and sage. These plants can be propagated by cuttings and are easy to layer. When a segment of the plant stem touches the ground anchor it there with a hairpin or place a rock on the stem, cover the area with a layer of soil and wait. Soon tiny roots grow along the stem. Eventually you'll separate the rooted portion of the stem from its parent plant (use clippers or a sharp knife), dig it up and plant it in another part of your garden. You can often speed up the process by scraping the area of the stem that touches the soil to encourage more root production.

We'll continue our discussion of herbs in later columns. In the meantime if you have Rosemary or mint in your garden try Fay Linger's jelly recipe. You'll be glad you did. You'll need: 2 cups rosemary (finely chopped leaves and top stems, in cheesecloth packets), 2 cups cider vinegar, 1-1/2 cups water (or 50/50 water/apple juice), 6-1/2 cups sugar, 6 ounces pectin (or two 3-oz. pouches Certo). Bring vinegar, water and rosemary to boil—remove from heat and allow to steep 20 minutes or more. Remove the rosemary. Bring remaining ingredients to a boil – add pectin – keep at full rolling boil for one minute. Seal in jars or process 10 minutes in water bath. Makes 6 or 7 eight-ounce glasses. You can substitute mint for Rosemary and add green food coloring.

Send questions or comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.