



Water When It's Needed

Basil is a water-hungry tropical herb. It needs regular attention from you with the hose or the watering pot. During the growing season when temperatures are above 60 degrees it loves a good soaking at least weekly. But when the temperatures are about 90 degrees you may need to water more often to keep the plant from drying out.

How can you tell if your basil needs water? Take your index finger and push it into the garden soil or potting soil down to the first knuckle. If the top inch of soil is dry then it's time to water. If the top inch is still damp, wait a day or two. Basil loves water but constant wet soil conditions drives out the oxygen and can result in rotting roots.



Grow Your Basil in Sunshine



Because basil is a sun-loving herb, plant it where it will get at least four hours of direct sunlight for healthy growth. If you have basil growing where it only gets an hour or less of direct sunlight, move it to a better spot. Basil growing in a container is easy to move but you might have a harder time if it is in the soil. Once temperatures rise above 90 degrees it becomes risky to transplant. Better to leave it where it is and remember to plant it in full sun next year.



Fertilize Faithfully

Because you want lots of healthy growth, fertilizing your basil plant is the second most important thing your herb needs. Think of it as a hungry teenage boy. You always need to keep the fridge stocked to deal with his never-ending appetite. The same is true for the soil feeding your basil's roots. Fertilize about once a month, whether in the ground or in pots.

What kind of fertilizer should you use? The best is a granular fertilizer that will break down into the soil and reach the roots quickly. Composted organic material such as steer manure or wood chips are also good. Liquid fertilizer isn't bad but not much will be absorbed by spraying it on the leaves. Better to spray liquid fertilizer directly on the soil.

Harvest Regularly

This is where some herb gardeners trip up. They think they need to wait until the basil plant is "mature" and ready to harvest. When growing tomatoes or squash you do need to wait until the fruit is fully grown. Not so with basil leaves.



Instead of doing a massive harvest late in the growing year, wait until the plant has grown to its adult height and then clip about a third of the plant about every six weeks. Each time you remove a section of the branches the topmost dormant growth buds will spring into action and begin creating new branches and leaves. By doing this you will harvest and enjoy more flavorful leaves than if you harvested only once.



Don't Let Basil Flower

We grow basil for the flavorful leaves not the flowers. Once this annual herb begins to form flower buds it stops creating new leaves. That's not what you want. What to do?

If you see the beginnings of a flower stalk, it's time to get busy. Take your clippers and cut the branch down at least three leaf nodes below the flower. Don't just clip the flower tip (a practice known as "deadheading"). If you only remove the flower bud it will just create another one. Doing a bigger harvest clip shocks the plant back into leaf growth – exactly what you want to happen.



Preserve Your Harvest

Harvesting basil is the big payoff for all the work you've done to keep it healthy. Once you clip a stalk off your herb you have three choices.

1. You can use it fresh in foods. Using basil right after it's been clipped gives the most flavor. From your just-picked basil you can make fresh pesto, combine basil leaves with other herbs in soups and casseroles, or flavor fresh fish and poultry.
2. You can dry the leaves. After harvesting, remove the fresh leaves from the stem and place them in a large bowl to dry. Toss the leaves daily to help speed the process. Once they are dry, store the leaves in an airtight container.
3. You can freeze the leaves for maximum long-term flavor. Rinse and pat dry the fresh leaves. Remove from the stem and place on a tray. Put the tray in the freezer to quick-freeze the leaves. Finally, gather the leaves into a freezer bag for future use.



I hope these six tips help you to grow and enjoy basil from your garden. Let's keep in touch so I can share other herbal tips. And thanks for subscribing to my newsletter. – Ann McCormick