BASIL, THAT INDISPENSABLE HERB

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REM-07302009-029

Basil, that indispensable herb, has been cultivated since the dawn of history. Originally used medicinally, basil has been grown since the nineteenth century as a staple of herb gardens and a favorite in cooking. A mint family relative with more than 50 species, basil has a flavor and use for every taste.

Basil can be divided into four main groups – sweet green, dwarf green, purple-leaved, and scented leaf. The sweet green basils have large two to three inch leaves and white flowers. Common types in this group are called lettuce-leaf or Genovese basil. Also included in this classification is the Thai basil cultivar 'Siam Queen'. The dwarf green basils look very different with compact growth and small leaves of about one-half inch. 'Spicy Globe' is a commonly available dwarf cultivar with a 10-12 inch round, globe-like growth.

Purple-leaved basils are both edible and very ornamental. This type of basil also has leaf texture that can be ruffled or serrated. Pink to purple flowers top off the look of this pungent herb. Selections such as 'Dark Opal' or 'Purple Ruffles' make attractive additions to the garden or landscape.

A final group of basils include types that have unique and recognizable flavors and scents. Lemon basil

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tastes and smells like lemon. 'Sweet Dani' is a good lemon cultivar. There are also cinnamon and anise flavored varieties.

Basil is so easy to grow from seed! While you can start basil seeds in pots to transplant later, I like to direct seed them right into the garden. Prepare the planting bed and sow your seeds in rows or broadcast them to form solid blocks of basil. Cover the seed lightly with no more than one-half inch of soil and water in. Seeds will germinate in as little as four to seven days. When the basil seedlings are about two to three inches tall, thin individual plants, depending on the variety, from 10-30 inches apart. Use the thinnings as your first herb harvest. Large growing types can be made more compact by regular pinching.

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on the Plant Lifeline from 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 764.4340 or by email Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com.

You can also visit them at one of our many Plant Clinics around the county: http://charlotte.ifas.ufl.edu/PlantClinics.pdf

While our current rain will take care of most of the irrigation needs, water as needed and allowed. Use a liquid fertilizer as directed on the label to support productive growth. While the flowers are ornamental, consider pinching them out to force the plant's energy into making leaves.

Basil also makes a great container plant. Making sure that the container has drainage holes, consider using flower boxes or five-gallon pails. Larger containers will require less watering. Use a soil-less, sterilized potting medium available at any garden center. Many of these soil-less mixes contain a slow-release fertilizer which will feed the basil over a period of time.

The rest of the work with basil is up to you. Leaves have the best flavor just as the flower buds begin to form. Regular picking for kitchen use will keep the plants producing new shoots. At some point in time, basil plants will wear out and need to be replanted. Consider growing a regular succession of transplants that will take the place of old plants and continue your basil harvest without too much interruption. Use basil fresh, dried or frozen.

Resources:

- Lewis, E. (2001) Basil Fact Sheet. National Garden Bureau, Inc. Downers Grove, IL.

- McAvoy, G. (2009) Basil – King of the Herbs. Hendry County Horticulture News. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

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