



Basil

Culinary Types:

Ocimum basilicum (sweet basil, herb royale)

O. americanum (syn. ***O. citriodorum***) (lemon basil)

O. tenuiflorum (holy basil, Tulsi)

Basils belong to the *Lamiaceae* (formerly *Labiatae*), the mint family, and have the square stems, two-lipped flowers and abundant fragrance-bearing oil glands typical of many members of the mint family. The name *Ocimum basilicum* derives from the Greek *okimon* (basil) + *basilikos* (royal).

Description: Basils of the *basilicum* species, which provides most of the culinary varieties, are extremely variable in height, leaf size, color and form. The herb has been in cultivation so long that numerous cultivars exist. **Large-leaved green basils**, known by such names as sweet basil, Italian basil, and lettuce-leaf basil, can grow to 2 or 3 feet in height, and just as broad if well pinched. Small-leaved green forms such as **dwarf basil**, **bush basil**, or **'Spicy Globe'** will grow to 8 to 12 inches in height and as broad. Reddish-purple variations such as **'Dark Opal'** or **'Purple Ruffles'** tend to be intermediate in size, bearing purple instead of white flowers. These variants of *O. basilicum* have minor nuances of flavor, and are used for the same purposes. Novelty basils, named for their fragrance connotations, have some culinary use and are worth taste testing for individual preferences; you may find plants offered as cinnamon, licorice, allspice or anise basils. **Lemon basil**, with a pronounced lemon fragrance, is a white-flowered, smaller-leaved slender plant producing less foliage than a large-leaved *ocimum*. It is properly called *O. americanum*, though growers usually identify it as *O. citriodorum*. **Holy basil**, *O. sanctum*, called Tulsi, "is a revered plant deeply woven into Hindu religious practices" (Darrah) and has been rarely used as culinary herb, but American cooks are beginning to experiment with it. The Thai basils that are now being imported seem to be representatives of several *Ocimum* species. Whatever species they may be, basils are a mainstay of Thai and Vietnamese food preparation.

Culture: The culinary basils, sweet basil, lemon basil, and Thai basil, are tender annuals in most of the U.S. and Canada, though perennial in the warm temperate and tropical regions in which they originated. They are easily grown from seed, from cuttings which root quickly in water, or from purchased plants, providing the soil has warmed to 70 degrees, the day length is long enough, and the weather has settled (the nights are not below 55 degrees). Growing tips should be pinched out as soon as six pairs of leaves have formed, to promote branching and the constant production of tender flowering tips for use. The flower buds contain even more oil than the leaves. Flowering starts by mid to late June in Zone 5, and flowering shoots should be pinched out with the pair of leaves directly below (for use, for more branching, and so that seeds do not form). Material for freezing and drying or

making oils, butters, pesto and vinegar should be cut throughout the summer from tips and young leaves, since older leaves have less oil content and become tougher. Though basil is heat loving and will grow strongly all summer, as soon as nights go below 50 degrees it shows signs of deterioration.

Uses: The flavor of fresh leaves is outstanding in salads (greens, tuna, potato, egg), with fresh or cooked tomatoes, with eggplant, peppers or zucchini, in marinades, as a sandwich garnish, and in the classic pesto sauce for pasta. Cooked briefly, it is an addition to soups, stews, and sauces. It works well with most other herbs. Basil is used as a potpourri ingredient and in making scented beads. It is used commercially as a flavoring agent in foods and pharmaceuticals, and the essential oils are used in perfumery.

Sources:

Darah, Helen H. *The Cultivated Basils*. Independence, MO: T.E. Thomas Buckeye Printing, 1980.

"A Special Issue on Basil." *The Journal of the Western Reserve Herb Society* VI (2) (Spring 1989).

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