

Spice it up

An herb garden can add pizzazz to dinner

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FRONT ROYAL

There's a certain sense of satisfaction that comes with growing something and using it on your dinner table.

Just ask the millions that plant vegetable gardens every year, or at the least, grow their own tomatoes.

One simple and easy way to make that connection is to grow your own herbs for cooking.

"It's not difficult to grow herbs at all, it's very easy, in fact, because they don't require a lot of care," says Billie Clifton, who owns a wholesale herb-growing business in Warren County. "They don't require a lot of fertilizer and the more you cut them, the happier they are."

Two years ago, Clifton opened The Sunflower Cottage, a retail outlet that allows her to interact with people and share her knowledge and love for herbs and other plants.



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A Sunflower Cottage staff member looks over some of the rosemary plants in the greenhouse.

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Herbs

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"We'll be having herbal cooking classes here, workshops on different herbs, coming up in the spring," Clifton says. "Whatever herb we're doing, whether its basil or rosemary, for example, we'll go through the whole process, from growing it, to harvesting it, cooking with it, storing it."

Clifton says there are four reasons for growing your own herbs, including freshness, volume, accessibility, and economy.

"You can have herbs that you can't get in the grocery store," Clifton says. "There are probably 20 different varieties of basil that you could grow and have access to, as opposed to the plain green basil that you get in the store – which is great stuff, but that's all you have in the way of choice."

When you go to the grocery store, Clifton points out, you can buy "two or three ounces of basil and pay \$4 for it."

"Or you can buy a herb plant for three or four dollars, go home and plant it and have pounds of fresh herbs right there at your doorstep," Clifton says. "If you need something, it's right at your back door, it's really fun to be able to walk out and grab something."

At the Sunflower Cottage, Clifton says they have an herb garden growing out front that they use to cook with the herbs and serve the herbal recipes in their tearoom.

If you've never grown any herbs and would like to give it a try, Clifton recom-

mends parsley as a good place to start.

"It's easy to grow and it's hard to think of an Italian recipe that doesn't have parsley in it," Clifton says. "And fresh-grown Italian flat-leaf parsley really has wonderful flavor, it's not just a garnish. Adding that to any recipe is going to make it a nicer recipe."

In addition to parsley, Clifton said basil, rosemary and thyme are some of the most used grown and used herbs in the area.

"Thyme is a wonderful herb to use fresh or dried, there are all kinds of ways to use it," Clifton says. "It's one of those herbs you can put in almost any recipe and taste the difference. If you have a favorite chicken recipe or ham or pork recipe, cook it the way you normally would, then add some sprigs of thyme and taste the difference."

Clifton puts thyme leaves in butter and spreads it on bread and biscuits, scones.

"Dill is another good herb to grow, everybody loves dill, and it's such a fabulous summertime herb," Clifton says. "We put it in everything, we put it in egg salad, sauces, tuna. Lemon and dill are great flavors together."

She says tarragon is a great herb using with chicken and fish.

"Herbs really do add a depth, an extra dimension, to whatever you're preparing," Clifton says. "I don't know if I have a favorite, I love them all so much and I try to



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Herbs can be grown in containers like this one and be kept on a deck or patio for easy access to the kitchen.

put them in everything we prepare here."

Clifton said she's going to start serving basil-lemonade this year.

"It is an awesome thing, you just have to taste it," she says. "You wouldn't dream of putting those two together on our own, but after you taste it you realize what a great combination it is."

When you grow your own herbs, Clifton said, you can dry them or freeze them or put them

in oil and save them for the winter.

"You can do a container of herbs to keep on your patio or deck, all of the herbs do pretty well in containers," Clifton says. "But you have to remember that a herb is not a small plant. You buy them in small jars at the grocery store and you grow to feel like it's a little condiment, a little plant, but that's not the case."

Clifton notes that some varieties of basil will get to be three-and-a-half feet tall, oregano is a big shrub and mint can take over your yard.

"When you put one in a container, you'll be much happier with yourself if you put it in a large container," Clifton says. "If you're going to put several in a container, make sure it's a large container, so they can reach their full potential."

Herbs need about six hours of sun and only a little bit of fertilizer.

"A lot of times people who have a deck will take terra cotta pots and line them up around the railing of the deck or actually stack them in a pyramid, with one herb in each pot," Clifton says. "It makes a neat design and they're right there outside your kitchen door."

Clifton noted that another advantage to growing herbs is that the deer don't eat them.

For more information on herb workshops, go to Sunflowercottage.net.