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Cold Tolerant Herbs

- By Mary Sisson Eibs

It is the end of January and I find myself with only a month remaining to refurbish and replenish my gardens in preparation for the tour of organic gardens on February 27. So, between visits from family members I have begun that task. It has been a cold winter at our house with temperatures as low as 20 degrees. In the past, I have spent hours covering frost sensitive plants in preparation for a cold night. However, I have cut down on this practice considerably and have decided to let Mother Nature have her way believing that everything has its season, including my herb gardens. Losing plants or portions of plants to frost forces me to perform much needed cleaning and pruning which is something I would usually prefer to put off indefinitely.

The lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*) has been damaged considerably by the frost but the lower buds have a lot of new growth. I will leave the damaged branches and leaves on the plant to protect it from further freezing and will then trim the dead growth back to encourage new growth. The Greek oregano (*Origanum vulgare* spp. *Hirtum*) remains dormant and has many brown leaves as does the lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*). I am still enjoying iced and hot tea made from the dried leaves of the lemon grass. The marjoram (*Origanum marjorana*) looks stunning right now with deep green, velvet-like leaves. It continues to produce new growth in spite of the cold temperatures. Now that the dreaded pineapple sage has been banished to a pot (where it continues its vigorous growth!) I can see how stressed the upright rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) has become due to lack of sun. I hope the dormant plants will begin to show signs of new growth by the end of February.

Now is the perfect time for planting cold tolerant herbs in preparation for spring. The past few days have been cloudy and mild which, combined with lower overall winter temperatures will give the new plants time to adjust before the heat of the summer begins. As my gardening skills have improved I've become more interested in experimenting with less familiar herbs or species of herbs which extend beyond culinary use. I've chosen herbs for their visual and textural contrast, medicinal herbs, tea herbs, historical herbs, herbs used in wines, and others for my new plantings. Since I do not have the space nor the room to grow my own herbs from seed or cuttings I purchase my herbs in small pots at a local nursery. What fun it is to wander through rows and rows of unusual herbs and to spend time chatting with the woman in charge of selecting and growing them. This is one way in which I gain new knowledge about herb gardening. Of course, when I am finished I find that I've purchased more plants than my small gardens will ever accommodate but it is impossible to resist such a wonderful variety. Since many of these herbs are new to me I consulted *Using Herbs in the Landscape* by Debra Kirkpatrick, for size and growing condition requirements. If you are new to herb gardening or if you are interested in new designs this is a great book. It contains very detailed information about common and unusual herbs.

I have gardens in several locations which receive different amounts of sun. In the full, afternoon sun garden I planted dwarf munstead lavender (*Lavender angustifolis*) in a mixture of sand, perlite, and compost to aid drainage, hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*), comfrey (*Symphytum officinalis*), golden sage (*Salvia officinalis* 'icterina'), purple sage (*Salvia officinalis*- *purpurascens*), and many species of thyme which I tucked into the soil filled holes in the cinder blocks used to line the bed. The west facing bed has become the "lavender zone". I chose species recommended for their heat and drought tolerance and these include woolly lavender (*Lavendula lanata*), French lavender (*Lavendula dentata*), fern leaf lavender (*Lavendula multifida*), and sweet lavender (*Heterophylla lavender*). Herbs which will tolerate partial shade were placed beneath the lemon tree. Included here are silver thyme (*Thymus argenteus*), bee balm (*Monarda didyma*), lovage (*Levisticum officinale*), variegated sage (*Salvia officinalis*- *tricolor*), trailing oregano (*Origanum compactum*), cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*), clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*), horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), and sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*). After running out of space in the herb gardens I planted feverfew (*Chrysanthemum parthenium*), several species of yarrow, woolly thyme (*Thymus s. lanuginosus*), golden lemon thyme (*T. x citriodorus* 'Aureus'), and valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) with the wildflowers in front of the house. I also combined some herbs in containers and I have plans to create a bed of foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) beneath the shade of a tall privet. My winter vegetable garden is thriving in the cool temperatures and my husband has built a wooden frame around it so that we can cover the top and west facing side during the summer. He has renamed this garden "Mary's Vegetable Palace". I have planted leeks among the garlic, beets, lettuce, spinach, onions, and peas in this garden.

I am excited about the new herb plants. Because our yard is small I must make use of what space is available and this has often meant that some plants do not thrive because of a less than perfect location or from being overcrowded. I have learned and continue to learn so much from experimenting with these factors over the years and I hope that I am becoming more systematic in my gardening techniques. I will keep you informed on the progress of these plantings and will tell you more about the history and uses of the herbs I chose this time around. I hope some of you attended the tour of organic gardens sponsored by Tucson Organic Gardens. Sharing ideas and knowledge with other "desert gardeners" is a perfect way to gain much needed information about gardening in our dry climate and to become inspired to experiment with new techniques. It is never too late to try something new.