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Sun or Shade?

by Mary Sisson Eibs

One of the most important lessons I have learned about herb gardening is that location is everything. My original herb garden was planted three years ago in a southwest facing location at the side of our house. Not the best location perhaps, but it was the only garden we had at the time and I was determined to make it work.

After my husband (bless his heart) double dug the area I dutifully amended it with compost and began planting in the fall. Because this area was small I decided to concentrate on the herbs that I knew I would use frequently such as parsley, sage, basil, oregano (Greek, of course), marjoram, chives, rosemary, French tarragon, and thyme. As my confidence grew I began to experiment with a few plants which I considered quite exotic at the time. These included lemon grass, lemon verbena, French and Spanish lavender, lamb's ears, yarrow, tansy, and sorrel. Most of the herbs seemed to enjoy the full afternoon sun. The bed was well mulched with compost and bark so watering was at a minimum even in the height of summer.

Then came the lemon tree. During one of their yearly visits my parents bought us a Lisbon lemon tree. We planted it in the middle of the herb bed thinking that some shade would improve the health of the plants and decrease the amount of watering even more. The tree grew amazingly fast. We were also expanding our water harvesting system at the time and we placed two 50 gallon collection containers on the south end of the bed and enclosed them in a wooden box for aesthetics. My once sunny location was transformed into a mostly shady area with periods of filtered sunlight and some of my plants did not like this at all. The French lavender became straggly and anemic looking, the basil was not thriving, the lemon verbena became long and unruly, the rosemary was barely alive, and of course, the pineapple sage only added to the disaster! When I started to clean out the bed this fall I found plants I'd forgotten about barely hanging on in a dark corner.

We have since added another garden in a sunnier location and I will transfer some of these poor herbs to this spot. Now I am on a quest to familiarize myself with shade tolerant herbs and their needs. One does not often think of shady spot gardening in the southwest but many of us with limited space must garden where we can and this may require some creative thinking.

In *Using Herbs in the Landscape* by Debra Kirkpatrick herbs are listed in groups according to their optimum growing conditions and those conditions which they will tolerate even though they may be less than perfect. Herb choices for a shady spot may include angelica (*Angelica archangelica*), sweet violet (*Viola odorata*), lovage (*Levisticum officinale*), saffron crocus (*Crocus sativa*), lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), and most mints. Some herbs which prefer full sun may also "accept" partial shade. These include French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculoides* var. *sativa*), borage (*Borago officinalis*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), marjoram (*Origanum marjorana*), and most varieties of thyme (p. 6-9).

Shade gardening presents additional challenges as well. If you are gardening under a tree you may need to trim some of the lower branches to increase the available sunlight. When digging beneath a tree be careful not to damage any roots which may be close to the surface. Your bed must be hand cultivated under these circumstances. Soil conditions for shade herb gardens should allow for good drainage since some of the herbs you choose to include may actually "prefer" full sun and may be damaged by too much moisture. I am always careful to add lots of well aged compost to my beds. I also sprinkle a small amount of soil sulfur and ironite on the surface before tilling. When I begin rearranging my shade garden I will be careful to place the taller herbs near the back so that the lower growing herbs will have equal access to any available sunlight. Surprisingly, I have found that lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) appears to enjoy partial shade. This would be a good choice for planting in the back of the bed. I have also had success with varieties of chives in this shady bed. These will also be planted toward the back. Marjoram is a plant of medium height and will be planted toward the middle of the bed as will the Greek oregano. The thymes will be planted around the outside edge facing west and the Spanish lavender (which still looks lovely) will appear in the front. The rest of my choices will be scattered randomly throughout the bed. While the herbs are taking root I occasionally spray them with fish emulsion or compost tea.

Shade is a scarce commodity here in the desert. We're all looking for it, especially in the summer. With the right combination of plants and soil conditions, those of us who must garden in the shade will enjoy a bountiful herbal harvest and will have the added benefit of being able to share some herbal iced tea with a friend, in the shade.