

Unfamiliar Herbs Offer Opportunities For Experimentation

It's easy to get into a rut when it comes to herbs. After all, the grocery store's variety is limited. Growing your own makes it possible to experiment beyond standard flavors for some surprising herbal experiences. Here are a few out-of-the-ordinary herbs to consider.

Basil may hinge its reputation on pesto, but that's a limiting view for its broad flavor profile. Consider cinnamon basil, a spicy green with a hint of sweetness, or amethyst basil, prized for its deep purple coloring and decidedly mild flavor. And if you're looking for a burst of the tropics, Mrs. Burns lemon basil packs intense citrus flavor in its larger-than-average leaves. The plant can reach over 3 ft. tall and is a prolific producer.

Mint also offers much room for exploration. Banana mint smells a little like its namesake, adding complexity to summer cocktails. The fuzzy green leaves are easy to dry and can be used in tea. Chocolate and apple mint also open up the world of complex flavor profiles.

As the mint family is known for spreading far beyond its growing space, it's wise to have many uses in mind to use up the abundance of leaves. One option is a rodent deterrent. Mice and other rodents don't like the scent, so scattering a few mint leaves where you want them to avoid can help keep them away. Stick with the most aromatic varieties; spearmint and peppermint tend to work well.

While sage is an understated plant, the pineapple variety produces lovely red flowers that hummingbirds struggle to resist. Enjoy its lightly sweet leaves and flowers in teas, or add them to floral arrangements for a fresh and fruity aroma.

If you want to branch out, consider growing horseradish. It's an aggressive plant, so choose its location carefully. The sharp spice



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of the fresh root is head and shoulders over anything you can buy. Even a sample will fully clear your sinuses. Give the plant plenty of space to stretch out its sizable leaves, and let it grow for at least two years before harvesting.

Borage is an underappreciated annual with beautiful blue flowers that self-sow once planted. The tender new leaves have a delicate cucumber flavor and are an excellent addition to salads, mixed drinks, or even frozen into ice cubes.

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One option for buying herbs is The Growers Exchange (ph 888-829-6201; www.thegrowers-exchange.com).

Faverolles Chickens Gaining Popularity

Faverolles are a dual-purpose backyard chicken. They're descendants of Houdans, a breed weakened by inbreeding and an overly large crest that impaired their health in winter. When large chickens from China entered the market in 1846, breeders combined them with the Houdan to create a hardy, quick-growing bird with excellent winter egg production.

Faverolles became France's leading table bird and featured prominently in Parisian restaurants. They were imported



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to New York around 1901 and accepted into the American Poultry Association in 1914. While white plumage with dark markings on the hackle feathers became preferred, breed standards allowed for color variations to avoid inbreeding and loss of hybrid vigor. This level of variation led to arguments over the standard, meaning the breed wasn't officially recognized in France until 1930.

Changing market pressures put faster-growing chickens on farms in the 1950s. Within decades, Faverolles were almost extinct across France. Thanks to the work of the Houdan-Faverolles Club, their numbers have recently climbed back into the thousands. By 2022, a surge in population led the Livestock Conservancy to move them from "Threatened" status to the less severe "Watch."

Faverolles are medium-sized with wide, compact bodies and wings held close to their sides. The heads have voluminous beards and muffs that conceal their ear lobes. No crests are present, but the plumage is abundant,

dense and fluffy. You'll find the pinkish-white legs have light feathering and five well-separated toes. Despite their existing color variations, only salmon and white are recognized by the American Poultry Association. They're classified as having a dual purpose for meat and egg production. Their hardiness and friendly nature make them ideal for any level of chicken owner. Expect approximately 150 tinted, slightly pink eggs per year. Laying stays strong over the winter; the hens make excellent sitters and mothers. Hens weigh around 6.5 lbs., and the roosters weigh 8 lbs.

Faverolles are known for their energetic, curious personalities. While they love to roam, they easily befriend humans and make for calm, engaging backyard birds. Considered poor flyers, they're easily contained in fencing. Their abundance of feathers helps them thrive in cold, damp climates, though the thick beards and muffs can limit their field of vision.



Dryden built a small yet authentic-looking parade-ready custom steam engine out of rusty farm parts and a Fairbanks Morse Z gasoline engine.

Mini Steam Tractor Wows Parade Goers

Laurie Dryden says her husband owned a 1947 throttle-governed Fairbanks Morse Z gas engine for many years and wanted to use it for something other than running a water pump or churning ice cream.

"One day almost 10 years ago, he came in for dinner and tells me all excited, 'I finally have a new idea for that old engine, and I think it's gonna work,'" Dryden says.

Richard Dryden's new idea, his Fairbanks Morse Z Steam Tractor, has been a head-turner at local parades and tractor shows for nine years.

Laurie says, "Richard's creation started as a rusty old air compressor tank, steel wheels from an old fertilizer spreader, a few spare Deere combine parts and other rusty iron thrown in for good measure."

Dryden mounted the old Fairbanks engine on top of the compressor tank and added shafts, gears and chains to drive the rear wheels. He replicated the steering on old

steam engines for his creation and stands on a platform behind the tank to drive it. Behind him, two wooden boxes represent the water tank and fuel tank found on authentic large steam tractors. A 4-ft. tall 8-in. pipe sends out a small amount of smoke from the top of the tank.

"A steam tractor isn't really authentic without a whistle," Laurie says, "so Richard mounted one that he salvaged from an old canning factory where he used to work. It sounds like the real deal." To replicate the old steam tractors further, Dryden painted the steel wheel spokes bright red and the old rusty tank and smokestack a dull black.

Laurie says, "The Z Steam Tractor has been great fun at parades and tractor shows. He can ride it down the street, and, by adding a belt, he can even power different antique machines like a corn sheller or grinder."

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Serviceberry Trees Add Color, Feed Wildlife

The serviceberry, native throughout eastern North America, has been a lifelong favorite for field naturalist Tami Gingrich.

"I had a deep love of nature starting as a young child. I remember having all kinds of cages and aquariums when I was little and raising anything I could find," Gingrich says. "I spent my career in the county where I grew up in northeast Ohio, surrounded by the nature I'm most familiar with."

She's long held a fondness for serviceberries.

"When we built our house, there were a few target species I wanted to make sure were planted close by. One of them was the serviceberry. I wanted one within viewing distance of our windows and am so glad I did. The trees flourished in the forest opening and are now one of the biggest wildlife magnets we have."

Serviceberries, members of the rose family, are small deciduous trees also known as Juneberry, saskatoon, sugarplum and shadbush.

"As one of the first trees to bloom in the spring, they offer a much-needed mental boost after the long winter months," Gingrich says.

Serviceberry flowers were once considered a sign that the soil was thawed enough for spring burial services—hence the common name.

"The fragrant blossoms help early pollinators like bees and butterflies, which leads to copious amounts of berries for birds and mammals. The leaves also play host to many caterpillar species," says Gingrich.

The flowers last about a week before transforming into junberries. These waxy berries hang in clusters and appear in shades of red, blue and purple as they ripen at different times.



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Gingrich describes the taste as "a blueberry crossed with an apple, with a touch of rosewater and the crunch of almond-flavored seeds. A wild and complex flavor."

She samples conservatively, as the berries are an essential food for wildlife.

"Still, every few years, our tree outproduces itself, and many berries drop to the ground uneaten. That's when I'll partake in the harvest myself, though I'll only pick enough berries for the recipes I'm planning. They freeze nicely; sometimes I'll make them last a couple years."

Gingrich never harvests more than a quart every few years. She cautions readers to use similar restraint.

"Only take a limited number from each tree. Never decimate the yields. I actually never wild-harvest serviceberries and only collect them from the tree in my yard."

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