



Kate Penhallegon holds a bowl of sweet basil.

RACHEL FOSTER

## A Bunch of Basil

A timely herb for easy living.

**W**ith sunny days, mild evenings and the many distractions that make a Eugene summer, I want less gardening and lighter food. Simple Mediterranean food, heavy on market produce and eaten at room temperature, really hits the spot. In the garden, gaps in borders no longer suggest serious revision but a simple fix: plugging in plants that thrive on heat and grow fast when they get it. At this time of year my mind turns to aromatic, herby things like lavender and sage. And, speaking of Mediterranean food, to basil. Basil originated in warm climates, and there isn't much point in planting it outdoors without protection until June or July.

The basil that went into the pesto I just had for dinner is sweet or lettuce leafed basil, catch-all terms for basil with large, glossy bright green leaves that may be slightly ruffled or convex. It's the type you strew, if you do, on tomatoes and mozzarella. Varieties include Genoa and Napoletano. Although sweet basil dominates the market, some other types are readily available, including anise-flavored Thai, cinnamon and purple basil, and bush basil with tiny leaves, such as "Spicy Globe." All of them are decorative. I used to favor Purple Ruffles as an ornamental, but now I prefer the melding of muted green leaves with purple stems and bracts that you find in Thai and cinnamon basil.

Looking around the Lane County Farmers Market for starts, I encountered Kate Penhallegon of Cottage Herbs Nursery ("Let us Show You a Good Thyme"). When I asked Penhallegon if she would talk to me about basil, she said sure; then she added, "I have a great book about basil, too."

I caught up with Penhallegon at the Rosses' one-acre farm in Springfield. Less than a minute from Main Street, it felt like another world. On the way to the door I encountered a broody hen, sitting on her eggs in a warm, shady window box, and there were pigs, a goat and chickens out behind the greenhouse. She welcomed me with linden tea, rosemary biscuits and basil-lemon butter.

The book Penhallegon referred to (*Basil, An Herb Lover's Guide*, by Thomas DeBaggio and Susan Belsinger) has the topic covered, from mythology to propagation to recipes. A directory of varieties describes 44 basil, including several species and many named varieties, win-

nowed from 100 different seed batches the authors grew and tested in a single summer.

Although I enjoy herbal scents I am very poor at recognizing their components, so I am quoting *An Herb Lovers Guide* when I tell you that basil's varied gene pool creates "a plethora of clear, gem-like scents that range through lemon, camphor, cinnamon, clove and anise." The essential oils in sweet basil include a hefty proportion of floral-scented linalool, in case you are interested, while Thai basil derives its anise scent and flavor from methyl chavicol.

Most culinary basil is annual, and all the more familiar types can be grown from seed, preferably with bottom heat. The biggest challenge in growing lots of basil is to keep it from flowering or, as growers call it, bolting. Once they have flowered, annual basil will not grow. "I call them my type A personalities," says Penhallegon. "They want to go from seed to seed as fast as possible."

Although basil will happily grow in full sun, she suggests planting a row of basil on the east side of a row of tomatoes. Protection from afternoon sun may slow the tendency to bolt. You can also make successive sowings, two or three weeks apart, to keep fresh basil coming.

Any basil can also be grown from cuttings, too, and it's the only way to propagate certain varieties, including Holy basil and African Blue. Shoot tips root easily in a glass of water. DeBaggio and Belsinger provided some answers to my lack of success growing husky basil plants in a pot. The authors stress the need to allow plenty of root space and to keep the plants in active growth. They advocate growing only one plant per pot, re-potting at least once during the summer, and feeding mature plants every third or fourth time you water. Water as soon as the soil looks dry or the pot feels light in your hands.

Penhallegon dries basil and includes it in the herb mixes she sells at the Market. They include a popcorn mix, a no-salt mix, and blends for making herbal butter and Italian salad dressing. Relatively quick drying techniques suit basil best, she says, and she uses an electric dehydrator that uses both light bulbs and a fan to provide medium-fast drying.

*Basil, An Herb Lover's Guide* is published by Interweave Press and is available at the Eugene Public Library. **EW**

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