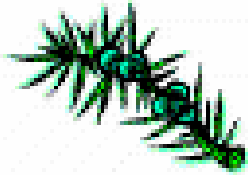


## **CLOSING UP THE HERB GARDEN FOR WINTER**

### **A Kansas Perspective**

by Andrea Ray Chandler



With the frost breathing down our necks, we're racing everywhere in the garden to get stuff brought in, trimmed, pulled and mulched before the ground seizes up. Thankfully, most herbs need little preparation for winter. However, not all of our friends are so hardy, and must be brought inside. This is quite a shock for gardeners who may have moved here from warmer or gentler climes; in San Francisco, bay laurel trees line the streets, and the rosemary is a fragrant, year-round shrub. But "You ain't seen nothing yet!" Since our winters can get down to -20° F (that's 52 degrees below freezing, mind you), we can't leave these Mediterranean and Asian herbs out of doors.

Tender potted herbs which must be brought in before frost include: aloe vera, bay laurel, ginger root, lemon grass, hot peppers, Mexican oregano (*Lippia graveolens*), rosemary, and scented geraniums. Other perennials not listed are winter hardy in the Kansas City area. Annual herbs which can be re-seeded next year and do not need to be brought in include: angelica, anise, basil, borage, calendula, caraway, chervil, coriander/cilantro, dill, fennel, fenugreek, nasturtium, hot peppers, perilla, parsley, and summer savory.

### **PLANTING AUTUMN BULB HERBS**

Thankfully, not all planting has to be done in the spring. In fact, autumn is the best time to plant such bulbs as saffron crocus, garlic, walking (Egyptian) onions, and shallots. All bulbs are planted "pointy end up". They will root quickly after planting, and be ready to grow next spring. Fall-planted garlic will produce larger heads than spring-planted garlic.

- Plant the saffron crocus bulbs upon receipt or purchase (in September or early October), 4 inches deep and 4 inches apart. If the crocus flowers for you soon after planting (it is an autumn-flowering crocus), then pick the orangey-yellow thread-like stigmata. Let dry on a plate somewhere safe, then store in a cool, dim, dry place. You now have saffron for cooking!
- Plant garlic by separating a head into cloves, and plant the cloves pointy-end up, 2 inches deep and 4 inches apart.
- Plant walking onions and shallots 2 inches deep and 6 inches apart.

### **HERB DRYING**

Has the herb garden been especially good this year? Our frequent rains have kept things from wilting from thirst. In each season, there is a crop that excels, and another that does miserably. This is the way things are, and next year the winners and losers

may well be completely different plants, so persevere. Should you have an abundance of a particular herb, take the opportunity of cutting and drying it for enjoyment throughout the winter.

1. Pull annual herbs up by the roots, knock off the soil, use your pruning shears to cut off the roots (compost those), then hang the branch(es) upside-down someplace dim and cool, such as your garage or basement. You can also do this to hot pepper shrubs if you're too busy to pick them individually right now.

2. Prune perennial herbs, then hang to dry in the same manner. Woody perennial herbs (horehound, rosemary, sage, tarragon, and thyme) must be carefully pruned for harvesting before drying. Use your pruning shears to trim off leggy branches, cutting the stem right above where some smaller leaves branch off (see illustration). Leave enough sprouting points for the shrub to regenerate next spring. The careful harvesting-by-pruning will actually create a fuller, bushier plant. This method is especially good for rosemary and sage, which would otherwise get "leggy" naked lower branches. (This method is not unlike pinching back a chrysanthemum.)

Mounding soft perennial herbs (both kinds of chives, lemon balm, all mints, oregano, winter savory) can be harvested by grasping large handfuls of foliage, and using sharp scissors or pruning shears to give the plant a "buzz cut" by trimming everything off 2-3 inches above ground level. The plant will grow back next year. (TIP: To keep these adventurous plants from reseeding themselves everywhere, next mid-summer when they just begin to bloom, give them a longer haircut, just below where the flowers start to blossom on the branches. They'll fill back in, and you'll have plenty of fresh herbs to use.

3. I like to tie herbs into bundles with strong quilting thread or dental floss. Knot them snugly, since the stems will thin upon drying. Depending on the local humidity, size and moisture level of the herbs, they can take a few days to dry.

4. When they're crispy-crumby, then herbs are done. You can leave them in bundles or rub them between your hands, and store the crumbs in a jar.

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Andrea Ray Chandler is a lifetime member of TGOA/MGCA and former editor of the Olathe GOA's "Horticultural Highlights". Chandler received the national Golden Quill Award in 1999 for her writing ability; her publications appear in numerous national magazines. In addition to being a mom, volunteer and lecturer, Chandler is a full-time student working on a degree in Horticultural Science.

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