

Grow your own spices

Spices add a heady fragrance and an intense flavour to food and some of them are easy to grow at home.

Unlike herbs, which allow cooks to pop out to the garden to snip a sprig or two for the casserole, herbs (with some exceptions) are usually harvested once a year and then dried and stored.

We tend to use the terms herbs and spices interchangeably but today most people consider spices to be plant bark, roots, fruits and seeds with the term herb used for the leafy part of plants.

Some plants (an example being coriander and dill) are both herbs and spices as the leaves are used fresh in food while the spice is from their seeds.

Perennial spices

These plants live for more than a year.

Pink pepper (Schinus molle)

Black pepper needs a tropical climate to set seed but pink peppercorns come from the popular and drought tolerant peppercorn tree. The pink fruits look and taste much like black pepper but are more delicate in flavour and can be dried or preserved by pickling in brine. Some people react adversely to this spice so use it with care.

Grow: The trees are drought tolerant and very well suited to WA, growing up to 15m and have pendulous linear leaves which give off a peppery smell in wet weather. Plant from seed or order from nurseries.

Saffron (Crocus sativus)

This bulb produces a strap-leafed plant about 40cm tall. Only one pretty, purple flower, each with three stigmas, appears on each plant. The bright yellow stigmas are the saffron spice and you need more than 50 for a tablespoon of spice which is why it is the world's most expensive spice. Dry them on a sunny windowsill and store in a glass jar in a dark cupboard.

Grow: in full sun to part shade in rich soil. Plant bulbs (available from most bulb sellers) in autumn to early spring.

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*)

An attractive tropical plant from 40cm-1m tall with a juicy rhizome used as flavouring for sweet and savoury dishes. The new shoots, which have a much milder flavour, can also be eaten.

Grow: From the rhizomes sold by greengrocers or Asian supermarkets. Look for young 'roots' with pale, swollen, growing tips. Grow in pots in dappled sun in a warm area as plants hate the cold and must be kept moist during summer. Apply liquid fertiliser. Harvest in autumn after the plant has been growing for at least 3-4 months.

Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*)

This plant is related to ginger and has bright orange rhizomes which are dried and powdered to make the bright yellow spice. Use only small quantities of fresh roots in food.

Grow: Same conditions as ginger. Takes 7-10 months from planting to harvest.

Galangal (*Alpinia galanga*)

Galangal is a form of ginger with a fruity flavour.

Grow: Like ginger. Takes 7-10 months from planting to harvest.

Chilli (*Capsicum species*)

The fruits of the chilli plant are an easy spice to grow and can be used fresh or dried for long-term storage.

These are usually grown as an annual plant but they are a short lived perennial (up to four years) in frost free areas. There are 25 species and thousands of varieties.

Grow: From seed, seedlings or buy named specialist varieties from nurseries. Plants fruit from 16 weeks after sowing. Best in full sun to part shade and ill tolerant of cold winds. It is easier to grow new plants each year than nurse older plants back to health.

Annual spices

These plants live for one or two seasons before flowering, producing seed and dying.

Mustard (*Brassica juncea*)

Brown or Indian mustard is the same plant which we grow as mustard greens which are used as a soil fumigant. Plants grow to 1m tall. Let them flower and harvest the brown pods.

Grow: Seeds are long lived and seed sown as packets of spice will usually grow. You can also use mustard green seed or seedlings. Mustard does not like hot weather, so sow in autumn.

Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*)

This is an essential aromatic ingredient in curry powder and Middle Eastern foods. Seeds are slow to germinate, grow to about 30cm tall and take about 16 weeks from sowing to harvest.

Grow: From seeds sown in autumn for a spring crop. Best in a sheltered full sun position. Does not like temperatures above 30 degrees so sow in late autumn or winter

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)

A perfect partner for fish the plant grows to 80cm and has attractive feathery foliage.

Grow: Sow in late autumn or winter. Harvest seeds about 6-8 weeks after seed germination. Plants do not like the heat

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*)

Aromatic seed used in curry powder. Plants grow 50cm to 80cm tall and seed is produced 10 or more weeks after the seeds germinate.

Grow: From seed or seedlings in full sun or light shade. Plants bolt to seed in hot weather.

Caraway (*Carum carvi*)

While grown as an annual this plant grows to 80cm tall and can be a biennial. Its ferny foliage resembles a carrot top.

Grow: From seed sown so plants grow through the cooler months.

Growing conditions

Unless stated the plants will grow well in Perth and SWWA but plants listed as tropical will only thrive if provided with warm growing conditions and good soil. They will not tolerate frost.

Plant tropical spices into pots which can be moved to sunny protected areas in winter but kept in dappled light in summer. Do not let them dry out when it is hot.

All herbs need free draining soil improved with organic matter and sandy soils benefit from the addition of kaolin or bentonite clay. Feed fortnightly with liquid fertiliser based on fish and compost.

Tip

Harvest seeds by either placing paper bags over the ripening fruits or pick them as they turn brown and store in a paper bag.