A Trio of Herbs for the Holidays

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Rosemary, with its evergreen foliage, is the backbone of any herb garden.

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The joys of family and friendship are never more evident than over the holidays. Gatherings always seem to gravitate to the kitchen with the comforting warm smells of home cooked meals and potlucks. Three essential herbs which add flavor and excitement to cooking for me are rosemary, sage and parsley.

Rosemary, being the backbone of any herb garden with its evergreen foliage, can be grown in the ground or as a potted specimen plant. Give it plenty of sun and good drainage. Rosemary blooms on old growth so if you use it a lot as I do you won’t see many of the blue blooms. By planting more than one, you can have one for culinary uses and one for blooming. Rosemary is used fresh or dried in many ways. Garlic roasted potatoes with minced rosemary leaves and olive oil permeates the house with the delicious smell. Add to a cream of tomato soup to astonish your guests. Mix three tablespoons of chopped rosemary to your favorite sugar cookie recipe or yellow cake mix and you’ll have folks wondering, “What is that flavor?” It is also very pretty to tie fresh sprigs onto wrapped gifts. Rosemary is the herb of remembrance and fidelity.

Sage flourishes in the fall and winter months and suffers through our humid summers. So treat it as an annual and grow it in a pot or raised bed. It likes to be ‘high and dry’ with plenty of sunshine and a slightly alkaline soil. It is wonderful in country-style cornbread. Then use the leftover (if there is any!) as a stuffing for your favorite fowl along with walnuts and oysters. A white bean soup wouldn’t be comfort food without plenty of sage in it. Add it to a pumpkin or winter squash risotto. Try in any cheese ball recipe. Once you get familiar with fresh sage you’ll be hooked.
Parsley, especially flat-leaf, also known as Italian parsley, is packed full of vitamins and adds the freshest of flavors to any dish. A pesto made with parsley and arugula or cilantro will start off a holiday gathering perfectly. Parsley compliments many stronger flavored herbs in this way, but it also stands on its own and can only be used fresh. Plenty of parsley is needed for tabouli salad along with mint. Chop it fresh over pasta with clam sauce! You cannot add too much minced parsley to dips, salad dressings or spreads. It’s great in freshly pureed hummus. Throw in a generous handful to garlic mashed potatoes. A beautiful plant in the winter garden that keeps very well in a vase on the windowsill, parsley perks up any fresh flower arrangement with its vibrant green foliage.

One more handsome herb for the holidays is bay laurel. The culinary bay tree is sturdy and evergreen in the ground or pot and gives fresh greenery for holiday decorating as well as fresh leaves for the soup pot. The cut greenery lasts for weeks in water and gives a backdrop for seasonal paperwhites. Plant yourself a little herb garden and experience the texture, flavors and smells of herbs this holiday season!

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