

# Exploring Herbs

**Overview:** Herbs arouse kids' curiosity and interest because they thoroughly engage the senses. They can be grown indoors or out and in containers of all sizes.

**Materials:**

- a variety of herbs to explore
- craft and cooking supplies as needed

**Approximate Time to Complete:** 1+ hour

**Location:** Indoor or Outdoor

**Ages:** all ages

**Season:** all seasons



## Instructions

Herbs were early humans' first medicines, food preservatives, and cosmetics. The word "herb" conjures up visions of soothing teas or the green flecks in spaghetti sauce, but just what is an herb? Some people define it as any plant or plant part used as an ingredient for flavor, fragrance, or healing. Spices, it seems, could fit the same bill. Here's the difference: Herbs are usually defined as plants of temperate climates whose leaves are harvested for use. Spices, on the other hand, tend to be of tropical origin; we use their roots (ginger), fruits (vanilla pods), flowers (cloves), seeds (pepper), or bark (cinnamon). They both differ from other plants in that they contain some active ingredient that is useful to us. These active ingredients are also useful to them too. The real role of these adaptations is to help a plant survive in its environment — that is, to defend against being eaten!

Herbs have been surrounded by centuries of folklore and ritual, played vital roles in earlier times. Imagine how people coped hundreds or thousands of years ago without drugstores, grocery stores, sanitary facilities, cosmetic stores, or adequate clean bathing water. Without refrigeration, food would have spoiled quickly. What better way to disguise the odors and tastes of rotten food than with aromatic plants? The fragrances of many of these plants, in the form of potpourri, perfumes, and lotions, were also used to keep homes and bodies smelling fresh. What might people in those days have done for a stomachache? Through trial and error, they discovered that certain plants could be used to treat illness and injury. As it turns out, these observant people were onto something. In the late 1800s, chemists began isolating the chemicals in plants used to promote healing. (The word "drug" comes from the old Germanic word "drigan," which means "to dry," since drugs were originally dried herbs.)

Here are a few easy project ideas for home or school to help you explore herbs:

**Fragrant sachets** - These are small cloth bags filled with herbs and flowers that you can put in a drawer next to your clothes or hang in a closet to help make your clothes smell good. You can make bags with drawstrings so you can empty

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and refill them as the fragrance fades, or you can make little pillows by sewing together all of the edges of your sachet. For a strong, spicy fragrance, mix together dried leaves of basil, sage, lemon verbena, and thyme. Your young gardeners might use these as gifts or sell them to raise funds.

**Herb butter** - Youth can make this spread for bread or crackers by letting a stick of butter soften at room temperature, adding a tablespoon of fresh chopped herbs to it (with a bit of salt and pepper, perhaps), and mashing the ingredients together. Try individual herbs or mixtures, such as chives, parsley, and dill.

**Herb vinegars** - Slowly heat one quart of white or white wine vinegar in an enamel pan. (Don't boil it.) Wash some herb leaves and stems and pat them dry. Then add a handful to an empty bottle. Pour in warm vinegar and store the bottle in a cool place. The flavored vinegar will be ready to use in salad dressing or for cooking in four to six weeks.

Looking for supply-free activities? Here are some ideas:

**Herbal Sleuthing** - Invite kids to become herbal sleuths, looking for evidence of herbs in grocery stores, household products, pharmacies, and so on, then categorizing the ways in which we use herbs today.

**Family Favorites** - Ask your young gardeners to interview family members to discover which herbs they currently use for cooking and other uses, and which types were traditionally used by their ancestors. Create a family or class cookbook of favorite herb recipes.

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