

Helping Mediterranean Gray and Green Herbs Feel at Home in the Garden

By

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As herb gardeners, we grow the subtle-hued, many-textured gray and green herbs native to the Mediterranean. These herbs can be cultivated in many climates and soil conditions, and even do well in containers, as long as the plants are situated in well-drained soil, have good air circulation and full sun. At home, in the regions along the Mediterranean Sea, lavender, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, santolina, savory and thyme cling to mountains, hillsides and cliffs, and tenaciously creep over dry, stony, sandy soils. Climates and soils vary from garden to garden; we can't control the climate, however, we can alter the soil to provide a healthy root foundation. The following amendments have been helpful to us as we make the Mediterranean herbs feel at home in our gardens.

MIXES

Aggregate Mix for the Mediterranean Herbs

This Aggregate Mix is rich in “chalk” (lime/calcium) and beneficial minerals that are released slowly in the soil. These particles serve as aggregates that help the soil drain well. We use this mix to amend the soil in new beds, soilless mixes for container-grown plants or when planting new herbs into established beds. Combine 1 gallon of each of the following 4 ingredients in a 5-gallon bucket. Box ingredients together to mix well. Use 10 to 40 pounds per 100 square feet. How to store dry mix—for how long?

Oyster shell (35-55% calcium, 40% carbon dioxide, trace amounts of aluminum, copper, iron, magnesium, manganese, phosphate, silica, zinc, organic matter, chlorine, fluorine, and nitrogen.) Note: Oyster shells should not be used in alkaline soils.

Activated Charcoal (enhances drainage, porous carbon, potassium, and other minerals)

Greensand, Glaucanite (marine potash, silica, iron oxide, magnesia, lime, phosphoric acid, and 30 other trace elements. also retains water)

Granite meal (1-4% total potash and grit.)

Mediterranean Meal Mix

This Meal Mix is added to provide a balanced, “fast food” for new plants. Meals are ground into fine powders which become available quickly. Combine one part each fish meal and bone meal and two parts kelp meal in a one-gallon container. Box together to mix well. Use 3 to 9 pounds per 100 square feet. When we create new beds, dig holes for new plants in established beds or transplant plants into containers, we use this meal mix.

Fish meal (10-2-2)

Bone meal (5-12-0 plus 15% calcium)

Kelp (variable N 1.7-2.5 P 5 K 2.25-6.25)

Textured Mediterranean Mulch

This mulch acts as a barrier between lower-leaf surfaces and soil-dwelling fungal spores, cools the surface of the soil, conserves moisture, becomes part of the soil structure and is attractive. Combine equal parts of the following ingredients and box ingredients together

to mix well. Apply to soil surface, 1/4 to 1/2-inch thick. The ingredients in this mulch differ in size and make an attractive, multi-textured, as well as multi-colored mulch for the gray and green herbs whether they are in the garden or containers.

Crushed oyster shell

Greensand

Activated Charcoal

Coarse Sand

Granite or rock dust

Lava Rock

OTHER FACTORS

Water

Water can be a matter of life or death to plants and water requirements change during different seasons of the year. Mediterranean herbs need careful watering when they are first planted for the establishment of new roots. During hot, dry summer months, they will need thorough watering about once a week, preferably in the early morning. Soaker hoses are the healthiest and most efficient way to get water to the garden. Avoid wetting the leaves in the heat of the day and before sundown. Water droplets magnify light rays and cause leaf burn. Water left on foliage after dark spreads fungal disease. During the winter, the plants are not using very much water for respiration and transpiration. Excessive water stays around the roots, suffocating the plant. Lack of oxygen and soggy organic matter encourages the growth of fungal diseases. Nonetheless, it is important not to allow the soil to dry out completely during a dry winter.

Organic Plant Food

Fish emulsion and liquid kelp are used in the watering solution and as a foliar spray during the growing season. Plants are fed as needed. During the spring and summer, plants are actively growing and use nutrients quickly. During the winter, plants do not use much nitrogen. Overfeeding nitrogen in winter is not only a waste of resources but may also cause disease symptoms in your plants.

Pest control

The first line of defense in organic pest control is to grow healthy plants. Enjoy and examine herbs on a regular basis, particularly in the early morning before the sun hits the garden. Insects are still at rest and the temperature is pleasant. When pests move in, the first control is to spray the plants with strong streams of water. Blast away aphids, scale, spider mite and mealy bug. If a pest is feeding, its proboscis will most likely stay in the plant as the rest of its body is swept away. Summer or horticultural oil will smother adult and larvae forms of pests. Soap dissolves the mantle of many adult and larvae pests. Neem repels and disrupts feeding and mating cycles of pests.

Disease

It is good to know when to discard pest-ridden or sick plants. Plants chronically infested with pests detract from the garden. Sick plants are hosts for fungal diseases that spread on air currents, on moving physical surfaces (like bugs and fingers) and through water on plant surfaces and in the soil. Remove and discard these plants into the trash, not the compost. Using Mediterranean Mulch will help discourage the fungal diseases. Biological fungicides, containing *Bacillus subtilis* bacteria, are effective in reducing fungal diseases when used at planting time and throughout the life of the plants.