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. Fortunately for us, 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.

To host these exotic plants in the Arkansas Ozarks and Maryland, we first pictured an arid chaparral, known throughout the Mediterranean region by the French term *maquis*, and as *macchia* in Italy, and *matorral* in Spain. We imagined an alluvial fan, comprised of eroded grit and stone, as forms the aprons around mountains or the banks and islets along rocky streams. In our mind's eye, we canvassed the surface with layers of mixed media—fine grit to coarse chunks of gray and green, rust, carbon black and stark white minerals to form the soil mulch.

Mediterranean herbs are well-distanced companions in this ideal landscape. Much of the mulch is seen so that each plant has good air circulation and plenty of light. Velvety down on sage leaves and lavender spikes, thick bright green needles of rosemary and savory, and the feathery mounds of santolina impart visual and tactile textures. The colors are a muted palette, ranging from soft silvers and gray greens to blue gray and dark greens, spilling over the surface of hard, mineral mulch.

Desiring to make Mediterranean herbs at home in our gardens or containers and give them the very best conditions for growing, we have created a planting mix to be worked into the soil, a meal mix for nourishment, and a mulch for on top of the soil.

You can work our mixes into established beds, or if you want to break ground for a new garden, find a location that has full sun or a minimum of six hours. It is most important that this spot have adequate drainage; an incline or slope is a good choice for a garden site.

Climates and soils vary from garden to garden. We cannot control the climate, however, we can alter the soil to provide a healthy root foundation. We use ground rocks, shells and greensand because they are not processed except for being made into smaller particles. There are no harsh acids to burn soil life and roots. Builder's sand and compost are the two most important amendments. The sand can be purchased from builder's supply and garden centers. Compost can/should be made at home but if it is not, composted cow manure can be purchased from garden centers. Worm castings and compost can be purchased from the producer if you do a local search. Crushed oyster

shells are available at farm supply stores. People feed the shells to chickens to produce hard-shelled eggs (it is often sold as chicken grit). Lava rocks in shades of balck, charcoal and rust, come in bags and are available at garden centers. Greensand, granite meal, fish meal, kelp meal, and blood meal may be a bit more difficult to come by locally. Organic plant food suppliers are listed at the end of the article. The nutritional value of each amendment is listed if known. The goal is to provide a balanced NPK with trace elements and compost to the new garden. The following amendments have been helpful to us as we strive to make the Mediterranean herbs feel at home in our gardens.

MIXES FOR NOURISHMENT & PROTECTION

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. Store these ingredients in a dry place.

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, Glauconite (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. They are ground into fine powders that will become available quickly. Combine one part fish meal, one part 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 new plants into containers, we use this meal mix. Store these ingredients in tightly sealed containers.

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. Store these ingredients in a dry place.

Crushed oyster shell
Greensand
Activated Charcoal
Coarse Sand
Granite or rock dust
Lava Rock

DRINK

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.

CARE

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.

Bibliography

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Organic Gardening (Staff). *The Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening*. Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 1978

Sources

Use your green thumb to flip through your local telephone book or go on-line to find distributors of organic amendments closer to home. Save shipping.

Gardens Alive!
5100 Schenley Place
Lawrenceburg, IN 47025

Nitron Industries
PO Box 1447
Fayetteville, AR 72702

Your local feed store should have crushed oyster shell and chicken grit containing oyster shell and ground granite.