

COOKING *and* DECORATING with wildflowers & herbs

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IT'S SPRING, and the state's roadways are dotted with thousands of tiny specks of blue, green, purple, orange, and red. Our open spaces have become thick carpets of colorful blooms: wildflower season. Mothers from Nagadoches to Fredericksburg are plunking toddlers down amid seas of bluebonnets and brown-eyed susans for those traditional, iconic portraits. Reminding us of the beauty and variety of Texas flora.

Wonderful as the wildflowers are, however, there is a whole world of vegetation that many Texans have yet to discover. Terry Thompson-Anderson and William Varney of URBANHerbal, a Fredericksburg-based natural products emporium, are on a mission: helping others to explore the virtues of our soil and the things that flourish there. Since March kicked off the growing

season for the most useful herbs, vegetables, and flowers, now is the perfect time for their tips on bringing the green to your home.

Varney, former proprietor of the famed Fredericksburg Herb Farm, owns the storefront and hand makes everything in URBANHerbal's many bottles and jars. This includes personal care products such as soaps and lotions, kitchen supplies like oils and seasoned salts, and candles and oils to freshen the home. Chef Thompson-Anderson teaches many of the company's cooking classes. Both also avid gardeners growing the things they use at work and at home, cultivating many native varieties, plus a few imports with a natural affinity for our soil. Hardy, easy to grow, and versatile, their favorite plant species have applications from cooking to decoration to healing.

Of course, plants have the added advantage of being beautiful in their own right. Varney is enthusiastic in discussing their most obvious benefit—plants add curb appeal. Artemesias and sagebrush species, rosemary, salvia, and yarrow all thrive in the well-drained soil of residential landscaping and planters. Drought resistant, these all produce fragrant leaves and flowers that dry well. Butterflies particularly love fragrant-smelling varieties like the Sweet Annie Artemisia or yarrow. Landscape plants can brighten up interior spaces, too. Snip the flowering branches from a sage or salvia bush, arrange them on the kitchen table or in a vase, and they will scent and cheer a whole room. Some species like rosemary can pull double-duty as both decoration and foodstuff (*though many landscape varieties, such as most of the larger sagebrush species, are non-edible. Look for their*

terry thompson-anderson's BASIL & TOMATO SPREAD

Otherwise known as a “fifteen minute party,” she loves to prepare this simple recipe for friends, especially those who drop by on short notice. The ingredients include fresh basil, oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, and olive oil. Run these through a food processor and then serve them with a baguette or crostini; your guests will think you signed up for Cordon Bleu classes on the sly.

Bill Varney's ROSEMARY FOOTBATH

This is a simple but luxurious way to recharge after a long, exhausting day. Trim a few sprigs of rosemary from your plant; drop them in a wide, shallow bowl with a few marbles. Pour warm water into the bowl and soak your feet, pressing gently against the marbles for a little self-reflexology.

smaller cousins if you want something around to toss in a soup pot.)

Freshly cut herbs make all the difference in cooking, as well. Both accomplished chefs and cookbook authors, Thompson-Anderson and Varney swear that mixing a few chopped lemon verbena leaves with sugar in the drink shaker, produces cocktails that their friends cannot forget. And a really top-notch winter gumbo demands fresh bay leaves, not the desiccated things from the grocery store. With these facts in mind, they believe that every home should have a small kitchen garden.

Their recommended essential herbs include: basil, bay, chives, lemon balm, lemon verbena, marjoram, Mexican marigold mint (also called *Texas tarragon*), mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, and thyme. Most of these do not take up much real estate, so digging a small plot will leave the kids plenty of room to run in the back yard. The majority of herbs are also perfectly happy in a container on a patio, if you live in an apartment or zero lot situation. Even if outdoor planting is not possible, many can be grouped together in pots and kept on kitchen windowsills, where the light and humidity will keep them well-fed and flourishing. However you grow them, Thompson-Anderson insists that regular trimming is the secret to keeping herbs healthy, bushy, and productive. Cut them off at the center stem on a regular basis, as letting them go too long will cause herb plants to become straggly and thin. Think of it as an incentive to get creative with

your recipes, so you will never run out of motivation to trim.

Once you develop a taste for the fresh stuff, you will likely feel inspired to branch out. Many summer herbs will survive well into fall, but will go dormant in the grey chill of winter. Fortunately, holiday favorites like sage and thyme will thrive in cooler weather, so your turkey need not suffer the indignity of dried seasoning. Winter is also the time to put in salad favorites like arugula and borage—it has a cucumber-like flavor that Varney loves—which will keep you in fresh greens until next spring. These will burn off in the hotter weather that returns in June, but many will reseed themselves and pop up again when temperatures cool.

While you are trimming the stems of your favorites, keep in mind that flowers can also add beauty and flavor to dishes. Thompson-Anderson loves rose petals for potpourri and rose flower water for desserts. She candies violets to top cookies and cakes. Chive blossoms, Mexican marigold flowers, and calendula blooms make beautiful salad and drink garnishes.

After you have successfully integrated your garden with your kitchen and dining room, it is time to open the doors to the rest of your home. Varney uses a variety of plants for natural remedies and household purposes. Comfrey, also called boneset, is a key ingredient in poultices and salves.

Rue has soothing properties. Grown in flowerbeds, Tansy repels ants; dried and stored in drawers or closets, it helps keep moths away. A sachet of dried santolina leaves, artemesia, cedar shavings, rosemary, and mint will both keep pests away from closets and provide an aromatic welcome in your guest rooms.

Those wildflowers at the roadside are like the cover on a really good book; they grab the eye at first, but soon fade away as the real adventure starts. On the way home from snapping those selfies with your kids in the field down the road, stop in at your local garden center for a few pots and two or three herb seedlings, maybe some basil and a little marjoram. Find them a sunny spot and remember to water them every few days, then have fun exploring what they add to your life. Those bluebonnets will be long gone by June, but your garden will be there for you all year long.

