



Plant yourself an instant immune-boosting garden

Feeling vulnerable in the wake of all the panic surrounding COVID-19? I know I am. While I remain vigilant regarding my hygiene practices and social-distancing at this critical time, I cannot help but wonder why we only seem to consider the importance of building our immune systems at times when there is a global crisis.

The truth is that, every winter, influenza rears its ugly head and takes hundreds of lives. Each year, irrespective of the season, people succumb to pneumonia – and quickly too. I know of two people who lost their lives from pneumonia in recent years in a matter of hours after being diagnosed.

This got me thinking as to which *fast-growing herbs and veggies* we could all include in our gardens that could be harvested almost immediately for regular use in cooking, smoothies and teas, and I came up with an initial list of six quick-growing plants that will thrive equally in a garden bed or in a pretty pot in your courtyard or on a sunny balcony.

Typical growing conditions for herbs

Herbs and vegetables require a good 6 – 8 hours of sunshine, most importantly from early morning to mid-afternoon.

They also enjoy a well-draining soil enriched with a quality organic compost. Don't overdo the compost though - remember that most herbs come from a Mediterranean climate where soils are not always ideal, the summers are hot and dry and the winters cold and wet.

What to plant

I am writing this in the middle of March. We are between growing seasons, however it is still warm enough that, if you don't currently have these herbs in your garden, you can start growing them immediately. Some on my list are available as seedlings at garden centres; others, like spinach and broccoli sprouts can be sown from seed. I sowed spinach and bush bean seeds at our winter vegetable workshop last Saturday, and they have already germinated!

- Oreganum
- Broccoli Sprouts
- Thyme
- Spinach
- Rosemary
- Nasturtiums

1. **Oreganum** (*Origanum vulgare*)

This creeping herb supports healthy digestive flora and is a natural antioxidant source. It is also known as a great antibacterial agent, containing phyto-nutrients such as thymol and carvacrol, which help to fight staphylococcal infections.

Oreganum provides a wide range of benefits for our overall wellbeing. Most importantly it supports a healthy immune response and is easily combined in everyday recipes.



While research is ongoing, scientists have found the properties contained in the herb help prevent various staphylococcal strains from developing in food. Oregano oil showed 'significant antibacterial activity' against microbes that were resistant to certain antibiotics, suggesting that the herb could play a vital role in fighting diseases that no longer respond to antibiotics.

How to make. . . Oregano Pesto

Oreganum can be quite rampant if planted in the ground. If you choose to grow it in a pot, use a wide pot and keep the herb trimmed regularly so that it thickens. Use your cuttings to make some fresh pesto to give that Mediterranean flavour to your meals.

Ingredients

- 1 cup fresh oregano leaves removed from the stems
- 1/4 cup parmesan cheese (1/4 cup nutritional yeast as a vegan variation)
- Peeled garlic (to taste)
- 1/4 cup pecans/almonds or substitute nut or seed of your choice
- 1/4 teaspoon salt or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon lemon zest
- 1 tablespoon olive oil , use water to make oil-free

- *Optional* 1/4 teaspoon balsamic vinegar

Method

Pop all the ingredients in a blender, pulse them until the required consistency is reached and enjoy!

To Store

It will keep well in the fridge for between 5 – 7 days. The thin added layer of olive oil will help preserve the pesto, the oil-free pesto will not last as long.

2. Broccoli Sprouts



It's not broccoli season yet. We need to wait for the signs of cooler weather; however, if you are going to sprout broccoli seeds and eat them straight away, then any time is a good time!

*Method below

Sprouted broccoli plants contain high levels of a phytonutrient called sulforaphane, which you can also get from cauliflower, brussel sprouts, and other cruciferous vegetables. Early research shows that consuming the sprouts can

increase inflammation-fighting enzymes in the upper respiratory system.

Recently a published study suggested that those who drink a daily shake containing sulforaphane-rich broccoli sprouts will get a boost against flu viruses such as the influenza.

In an excerpt taken from an article on Google, I was heartened by this observation: "The researchers noted several changes to subjects' immune cells after administering a live flu vaccine in their nostrils. Later, those who had been drinking the broccoli-sprout shakes showed lower levels of the flu virus in their nasal fluids compared to people who drank a control shake with alfalfa sprouts."

While the sprouts blend well in green smoothies and shakes, they also make a tasty addition to salads.

How to . . . sprout broccoli seeds

If you don't have a sprouting jar (which can be ordered online from Living Seeds), use an ordinary jar that has been sterilised and pierce a few drainage holes in the lid, or drain by removing the lid and draining the water very carefully so that the seeds don't fall out.)

- Add two tablespoons of broccoli seeds to a sprouting jar;
- Cover the seeds with a few centimetres of filtered (or cooled water that has been boiled) and cover with the filter lid;
- Store overnight in a warm, dark place;
- The next morning drain the liquid and rinse the seeds with fresh water. Repeat this a couple of times a day as you would for any other sprouts;
- As soon as they have sprouted, store them in an airtight container in the fridge, and add to soups, salads, sandwiches or eat them as is.

3. Thyme

Thyme is fast gaining a reputation for its medicinal qualities, not least to treat acne and high blood pressure. This member of the mint family is a staple in most people's collection of culinary herbs but see what else it is becoming known for!

As a plant in your garden or in a container, it brings endless pleasure. Quick-growing, easy to harvest and an absolute delight in many recipes from garnish and sauces to salad and bread dishes, this is one herb that you cannot be without!



Variegated thyme is a pretty addition to your herb garden

Boost your immunity

Thyme is packed with vitamin C and is a good source of vitamin A. It is also an excellent source of copper, iron and manganese. If you feel a cold coming on, use as much fresh thyme as possible in your food and drink thyme tea to stop that cough or the onset of a sore throat.

Make the tea by pouring 1 cup of hot water over 1 teaspoon of dried thyme or 2 teaspoons of fresh leaves. Steep for 10 minutes and strain. You can add a dash of honey to this if you wish.

As a disinfectant

Essential oil of thyme holds fungicidal properties and can be used to get rid of a potentially dangerous air pollutant – mould. If you live in a mist belt area, then the chances are your cupboards will need to be cleaned annually to get rid of the build-up of mould. This oil could well do the trick.

As a pesticide (too good not to mention)

Thymol or Essential oil of thyme is an ingredient in many pesticides that targets bacteria, viruses and the unwelcome presence of rats and mice. If you enjoy sitting outdoors but are plagued by mosquitoes, place a pot of thyme on your table and rub the herb between your hands to release the essential oil. You can then lightly rub your hands over any exposed parts of your skin.

How to make . . . a homemade repellent

- *Mix four drops of thyme oil with a teaspoon of olive oil and wipe it over surfaces, or*
- *Mix five drops of oil with 50ml of water and use as a spray.*

(Order your thyme oil online from Faithful to Nature)



4. Spinach

Spinach is a green, leafy vegetable with a high nutritional value. It adds colour and value to a multitude of dishes from salads and soups to vegetable dishes and smoothies.

It is rich in vitamins A, C and K, magnesium, iron and manganese. Eating this leafy green vegetable may benefit eye health, reduce oxidative stress and blood pressure levels.

Greens such as kale, spinach, and Swiss chard are immune-boosting foods that contain high levels of vitamin C, beta carotene, zeaxanthin, lutein which not only packs a powerful antioxidant punch, they help fight off infection and regenerate other antioxidants in the body, including vitamin E. They also contain folate, another **immune** booster.



How to make ... a spinach smoothie

You can blend spinach with any number of fruit and other vegetables to make a power-packing smoothie to start your day. As some fruits are going out of season, I have chosen two that are available year-round – the banana and pawpaw.

Ingredients

- 3 cups packed spinach
- 1 medium very ripe banana — peeled, cut into chunks, and frozen (slightly less than 1 cup)
- A section of ripe pawpaw (this fruit is excellent for digestion)
- 1 cup unsweetened almond milk or milk of choice.
- Optional extras – pineapple, strawberries, chia seeds, cucumber, berries . . . the list is endless.



Adjust quantities to your liking and blend until smooth. Enjoy!

5. Rosemary

Rosemary is a rich source of antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds, which helps to boost the **immune** system and improve blood circulation. Laboratory studies have shown Rosemary to be rich in antioxidants which play an important role in neutralising harmful particles called free radicals.



The active components in Rosemary are anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory and anti-carcinogenic in nature. This represents a three-pronged attack against a variety of diseases and pathogens that often threaten the immune system. Rosemary also has anti-fungal, anti-bacterial and antiseptic properties.

This invaluable herb can help with a fever during the beginning stages of influenza (flu) when you are cold and shivering. Make a tea by pouring 1 cup of hot water over 1 teaspoon of dried or 2 teaspoons of the fresh herb. Steep for 10 minutes and strain.

Rosemary is also great for steaming yourself when your nasal passages are congested. Pour just-boiled water over a handful of fresh leaves in a medium-sized bowl. Place a towel over your head, lean over the bowl and breathe in the fragrant rising steam. Take care not to burn yourself.

I purchased a new rosemary recently that is called Rosemary Ginger. It has a decidedly ginger fragrance when the leaflets are rubbed. I can't wait to try it!

We all know just how wonderful Rosemary is in food preparation, but did you know just how wonderful Rosemary water is for the skin?

Using rosemary on your skin is especially beneficial for your face. It contains anti-inflammatory compounds that make it useful for reducing redness and puffiness. Acne scars, sun spots, and any other related discoloration on the face greatly benefit from rosemary's healing potency. Because the herb neutralises free radicals, it will help to reduce redness, rashes and uneven skin tone. It will give you a radiant complexion!

How to make . . . Rosemary Water as a skin toner

- Use filtered water to half-fill a pot;
- Pick fresh rosemary from the garden and break the stalks into suitable lengths to fit in the pot. You can add as much Rosemary as you like;
- Add more water to just below the rim of the pot, place the pot on a very low heat and simmer for an hour. Every 20 minutes or so, press the Rosemary down lightly to ensure that it is still covered by the water;
- After an hour, switch off the heat and let it rest. Strain and bottle in a sterilised bottle and use as you see fit.

6. Nasturtiums



Pretty nasturtiums, with their jewel-colours, are one of my favourite plants. The climbing nasturtium can run rampant in a garden but, for some, this might be just perfect. I prefer the dwarf varieties as they are low growing so, even when they seed themselves – and they do seed themselves freely – they don't become a nuisance.

Sow seeds of your favourite nasturtium and see them sprout in just over a week! They should be planted in a sunny position and are quite gorgeous

growing in between lettuce and cabbage and at the feet of your sweet peppers and roses. That, again, is why I enjoy the compact varieties. They are the perfect companion plant, attracting aphids away from your vegetables and herbs.

Both the leaves and petals of the nasturtium are packed with nutrition, containing high levels of **vitamin C**. This pretty plant can improve the immune system, tackling sore throats, coughs, and colds, as well as bacterial and fungal infections.

Nasturtium flowers are easy to combine with salads. Some petals have a stronger flavour than others so experiment with younger versus older flowers and see what takes your fancy.

Nasturtium leaves have a potent peppery taste but contain high levels of vitamin C and a natural antibiotic. If you are battling a sore throat, eat three leaves, one per hour, and then see the difference.

You can sauté the leaves or include them in a pesto while the seeds of the nasturtium are similar to capers and can also be included in salads, or in a pickle.

Can you cope with another pesto recipe? I hope so, as this is so quick and easy and can be enjoyed with biscuits, pickles, flat breads and a host of other snacky foods.

How to make . . . Nasturtium pesto (courtesy Ask the Food Geek)

- 50 large nasturtium leaves or twice as many if small
- 1/4 cup pistachios (or favourite nut)
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1/2 cup Parmesan cheese (1/2 cup nutritional yeast as a vegan variation)
- salt and pepper to taste

Instructions

1. Wash the nasturtium leaves and shake them dry (they can be slightly wet);
2. Toast the nuts (it intensifies their flavour) – put them in a dry pan over medium heat, stirring every 30 seconds or so. Cook for 2-3 minutes – until they start to smell good. Then take them off the heat, or they will burn;

3. Fill your food processor up 3/4 of the way loosely, with leaves. Blend until they are chopped. Add more leaves, blend. Continue this until all of the leaves have been blended.
4. Add in the pistachios and blend until finely chopped.
5. Add in the cheese/nutritional yeast, red pepper and half the oil. Blend.
6. Add more oil until it's the desired consistency. This will depend on how much nasturtium you used.
7. Taste. Add salt, pepper, more nuts or more cheese until you like how it tastes.



I have really enjoyed putting this document together for you. In my research, it was immediately apparent that this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of just how beneficial so many of our common plants are in helping to boost our immune system. One could literally write a book on each of these wonderful herbs or vegetables.

Remember that these six plants can be grown and used almost immediately. They are all available in seedling stage so, get cracking, and plant yourself an immune-boosting garden!

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