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Herbal Heritage

With a love of herbs passed down from her mother, gardener and cookbook author Rita Heikenfeld is always cooking up something delicious.



My Mother's
Tabbouleh
(recipe on page 90)



Rita Heikenfeld harvests herbs from her garden in the morning to ensure they're at their flavor peak; by noon, the sun starts driving the volatile flavor oils back to the root or out the top of the flowering portion. A day before harvesting herbs, sprinkle them with water to remove any dirt and then allow them to dry.

Belgian Endive with Fresh Herb Spread

(recipe on page 90)



Herbs are always on the menu

at Rita Heikenfeld's house. As a child, Rita and her eight siblings helped their mother grow marjoram, basil, thyme, oregano, mint, dill, and parsley in a big black kettle container. Her mother used these herbs to flavor the family's traditional Lebanese dishes, and the cooking lessons also turned into a primer on growing herbs.

These days, Rita, an herbalist and cookbook author, is the one teaching. She gives cooking demonstrations at department stores, teaches college classes in herbs, and has written three books on herbs and nutrition. Rita's hands-on herb-growing classroom is her own garden in Batavia, Ohio, overlooking the Little Miami River.

"This space has a great country ambience, and I wanted the garden to be very simple and to reflect the earth around it," Rita says.

Rita planned her compact, 15×40-foot herb garden so that it would be visible from her long gravel drive. More important was that it be only a few steps from her kitchen door. "Herbs are much easier to use if they're right outside the kitchen," she says. Rita started the garden with the



Above Rita Heikenfeld grows about 75 herbs, plus a spattering of edible flowers, in her raised-bed herb garden. *Left* Rita subscribes to the French intensive method, planting closely to choke out weeds. Here, she has packed in Russian sage, 'Hopi Red Dye' amaranth, dill, basils, and more.

Rita's Spa Water
(recipe on page 91)





Stacked Tomato Napoleons
(recipe on page 91)

herbs her mother grew and expanded her selection as her culinary range increased. She added edible flowers for color. And when she started to teach at a nearby college, her garden became a place for students to learn what the herbs looked like as they grew.

The garden's layout is simple: Lower-growing herbs, such as thyme and basil, edge the outside beds. From there, Rita layers her herbs based on height, how much room they need, and how often she uses them. She's constantly tweaking the design and taking notes from year to year in her garden journal because, she says, "herbs don't always follow the rules." For example, a marshmallow plant (*Althae officinalis*) placed in the center of the garden surprised Rita by growing over 6 feet tall. The next year, she moved it to the back, so it wouldn't overshadow the medium-height herbs.

Because Rita cooks with herbs grown in her garden, she can supply firsthand knowledge to others who are bewildered by what to do with them. "People often say to me, 'I'm growing this herb or that, but I don't know what to do with it,'" Rita says. "I tell them 'Use it!'"

Rita follows her own advice, always testing herbs she



Grow a bounty of basil:
Italian, lemon, and Thai.



Chives are known for their
delicate onion flavor.



Cuban oregano has a strong
flavor; use it judiciously.



Subtle lavender thyme
complements vegetables.

Growing Herbs in Containers

Growing herbs in pots offers flexibility. Follow these pointers from Rita Heikenfeld on how to plant and harvest herbs with ease:

Select containers wisely. Most herbs need a wide pot to allow the herb room to grow, although dill and fennel require deeper pots because of their taproots. Ideal containers include ceramic, terra-cotta, and clay pots, or bushel baskets—anything with good drainage. Avoid black plastic because it draws the sun in, which dries the soil too quickly.

Water regularly. You'll need to water your herb containers often—especially if they're sitting on concrete, such as a porch step. You can try using an amendment such as Soil Moist, sold at garden centers, which is made with little polymers that retain water and swell to cut down on your watering.

Apply fertilizer. Herbs need a light fertilizer to keep growing all season. Try a slow-release option or an organic fertilizer.

Harvest often. Herbs grow more quickly in a pot than in the ground—so you'll need to harvest more often.

Overwinter herbs inside. They can grow well on a windowsill—just be sure there is good air circulation. Before bringing herbs inside, place them in a cool, shady spot for a few weeks. In the spring, move them to a shaded area outside and gradually increase the amount of sunlight they get.



Fresh Fruit Compote
with Mint Basil Syrup
(recipe on page 91)

hasn't grown before and developing different recipes. "I throw them in everything," she says. Her three sons are grown, but she still loves cooking herb-infused family dinners when they come to visit with the grandchildren. One of Rita's favorite things to do is harvest a handful of savory herbs from her garden, chop them semifine, and layer them into a green salad. "A salad is a safe place to try out herbs. It gives you subtle layers of flavor," she says. Her favorite herb-growing tip: "Don't be afraid to experiment."

For more information, see the Buyer's Guide on page 100.



Where to Cut and When

Throughout summer, snip plants regularly to encourage branching and new growth. Harvest successive cuttings whenever you need fresh herbs. Generally, cut no more than one-third of the stem's length. Exceptions include chives and lavender.



For more tips on growing herbs, see BHG.com/herbguide.

My Mother's Tabbouleh

"When using homegrown vegetables, I don't add the lemon juice," Rita says. Also, you can instead pass wedges of lemon for guests to flavor their tabbouleh as desired. Pictured on page 84.

Prep: 30 minutes Chill: 4 to 24 hours

- 1 cup bulghur**
- 6 tomatoes, chopped (about 4 cups)**
- 1 English cucumber, chopped (1¾ cups)**
- 1¼ cups chopped fresh parsley (leaves only)**
- 1¼ cups sliced radishes**
- ¾ cup sliced green onion**
- 1 green pepper, chopped (¾ cup)**
- ¼ cup chopped fresh mint leaves**
- ¼ cup chopped fresh basil**
- 2 to 3 teaspoons ground cumin**
- ¼ cup canola oil**
- Salt**
- Fresh lemon juice (optional)**

Place bulghur in a medium bowl and cover with cool water; drain. Repeat twice. Cover again with water; let stand 15 minutes or until most of the water is absorbed. Drain, squeezing to remove remaining liquid.

Meanwhile, in a very large bowl, combine the chopped tomatoes, cucumber, parsley, radishes, green onion, and green pepper. Stir in mint, basil, and cumin. Add the bulghur and gently toss. Add oil, a little at a time, and gently mix.

Cover; chill in the refrigerator for 4 to 24 hours. Before serving add salt, lemon juice, and additional cumin to taste. Makes 12 servings.

Belgian Endive with Fresh Herb Spread

This spread is an adaptation from one shared with Rita by her friend and colleague, Kay Hitzler. Use a combination of ruby and green endive if you like. Pictured on page 86.

Start to Finish: 40 minutes

- 2 to 3 heads Belgian endive**
- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened**
- ½ cup butter, softened**
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese**
- 2 teaspoons snipped fresh oregano**
- 2 teaspoons snipped fresh thyme**
- 2 teaspoons snipped fresh basil**
- 2 teaspoons snipped fresh dill**
- 2 teaspoons snipped fresh onion chives**
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic**
- ¼ teaspoon freshly cracked black pepper or dash cayenne pepper**
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice**
- Snipped fresh herbs or edible flowers (optional)**

Cut bottoms from endive heads. Gently wash leaves and drain well to dry. Set aside.

In a food processor or mixer bowl, combine the cream cheese, butter, Parmesan cheese, herbs, garlic, and pepper. Cover and process or mix until well combined. Add lemon juice and additional herbs to taste. Spread mixture into a disk (about 5 inches in diameter) in the center of a large serving plate.

Starting with the largest endive leaves, insert leaves in a single layer into the base of the disk, pushing in about one inch. Continue inserting layers of leaves in alternate rows making a flower-petal pattern. If desired, cover and chill in the refrigerator for up to 4 hours.

To serve, if chilled, let stand at room temperature for 20 minutes. Sprinkle with additional snipped herbs or flowers. Makes 12 (2 tablespoon) appetizer servings.

Tip: Cream cheese mixture can be made ahead and refrigerated, covered, for up to 5 days. Let it stand 20 minutes at room temperature before inserting endive leaves.

Rita's Spa Water

You'll feel like you are at a trendy spa as you enjoy this refreshing drink. The flavor makes you want to drink up so you'll stay hydrated and healthy, Rita says. Pictured on page 87.

Prep: 20 minutes Stand: 30 minutes Chill: up to 6 hours

- 1 cup loosely packed fresh mint leaves**
- 2 lemons, thinly sliced**
- 2 limes, thinly sliced**
- 1 liter bottled water**
- ½ to 1 cup sliced fresh strawberries and/or edible flowers (such as rose petals)**
- Sliced fruit, mint leaves, and/or edible flowers (optional)**
- Sweetener**

Place mint leaves in a 2-quart pitcher, gently bruising the leaves with a wooden spoon to release the volatile oils. Add lemon and lime slices. Add water; stir. Let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes. Stir in berries and/or edible flowers. Cover and chill in the refrigerator for up to 6 hours.

To serve, strain Spa Water into a pitcher; discard fruit. If desired, add additional fresh fruit, mint leaves, and/or edible flowers to the pitcher. Serve over ice. Pass sweetener. Makes 4 (8-ounce) servings.

Stacked Tomato Napoleons

Serve with serrated knives so folks can easily slice through all the delightful layers. Pictured on page 88.

Prep: 30 minutes

- ¼ cup balsamic vinegar**
- ¼ cup olive oil**
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic (2 cloves)**
- 1 teaspoon Dijon-style mustard**
- 1 teaspoon snipped fresh thyme**

Freshly ground black pepper

- 3 cups mesclun mix**
- 3 medium tomatoes**
- ¾ cup loosely packed fresh basil leaves**
- 3 to 6 ounces feta or Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled**
- 3 slices red onion**
- Cherry tomatoes (optional)**

In a small bowl, whisk together the vinegar, oil, garlic, mustard, thyme, and pepper until combined. Set aside.

Arrange mesclun on a serving platter. Cut off a thin slice from bottoms of tomatoes so they will stand flat. If desired, core out a small hole in the top of each tomato. Thickly slice each tomato horizontally into thirds. Place tomato bottoms on the greens. Top tomato bottoms with some of the basil leaves, some of the cheese, and a little dressing. Place second tomato slices on the first layers; add more basil leaves, onion slices, and dressing. Set tops of tomatoes on the stacks; pour a little dressing over the tops. If desired, place a basil sprig(s) in each cored-out hole. Sprinkle more cheese around the bases of the stacks. If desired, garnish platter with cherry tomatoes. Pass any remaining dressing. Makes 3 servings.

Fresh Fruit Compote with Mint Basil Syrup

Drizzle this unique syrup over your choice of seasonal fruit or add a little to hot or cold drinks for a burst of flavor. Pictured on page 89.

Prep: 10 minutes Stand: 20 minutes

- 1 cup loosely packed fresh mint leaves (spearmint, peppermint, lavender mint, or chocolate mint)**
- ¼ cup loosely packed fresh basil leaves (sweet basil, Genovese, or lemon basil)**
- 1 cup sugar**
- 1 cup water**
- Cut-up fresh fruit such as berries, melon, nectarines, apricots, and/or pineapple**
- Mint leaves (optional)**

Rinse and drain mint and basil leaves. Place sugar in a large saucepan. Add mint and basil; toss with a wooden spoon, crushing herbs into the sugar to release their oils. Add the 1 cup water to mint mixture. Bring to a simmer over medium heat, stirring frequently until sugar dissolves. Remove from the heat and let stand for 20 minutes to infuse the flavors. Strain, discarding leaves. Cover and chill in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

Just before serving, drizzle the cooled syrup over fresh fruit using about 4 cups fresh fruit and ½ cup syrup for four servings. If desired, sprinkle additional mint leaves over fruit. Makes 1½ cups syrup, enough for 16 cups fruit.

Tip: If syrup crystallizes during storage, reheat gently, then cool. ■