



Pests on Herbs

By Douglas A. Spilker, Ph.D.

No matter how you pronounce it – herbs or ‘erbs – these plants get pests, too!

Herbs can be a joy to grow, not only for use in cooking and as drink garnishes, but because of their wide variety of colors, sizes and shapes. They make interesting decorative plants for landscape borders, in

containers and in hanging baskets. Herbs are generally resistant to garden pests and diseases, which is one of the reasons gardeners find these plants so easy and fun to grow. Some herbs even repel pests from themselves as well as nearby plants. However, a few pests do occur, and can ruin the fun.

First: Identify the Pest

Common pests such as aphids, spider mites, caterpillars, Japanese beetles and slugs are well known for their fondness for both common herbs and vegetables. Ridding these pests from your herbs is a relatively easy job that commonly only requires attentiveness.

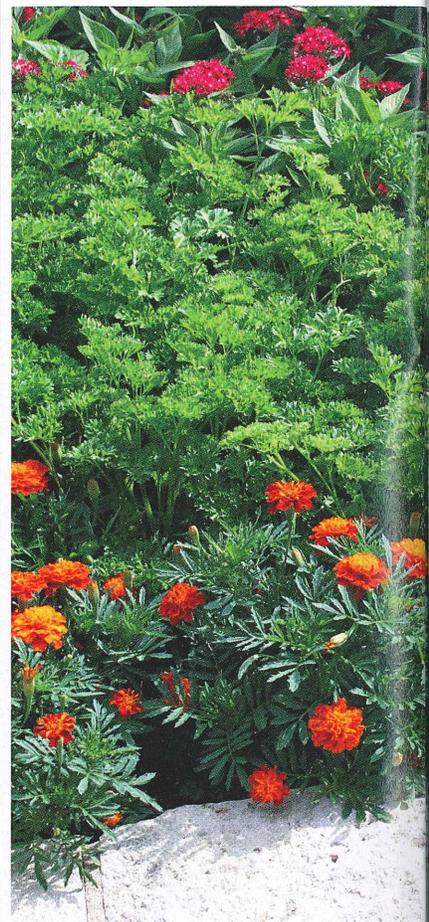
Caterpillars are probably the easiest seen pests on herbs, especially found on plants of the carrot family like dill, fennel and parsley. Be sure to identify that the caterpillars present are indeed undesirable before trying to eradicate them. It is not uncommon for some gardeners to plant dill and parsley to attract black swallowtail caterpillars. Since caterpillars are so large, they can be easily removed and discarded. If treatment is needed, consider an organic material such as Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). Physical removal should also be considered for Japanese beetles, but their voracious appetite can ruin leaves of broadleaf herbs like basil if action is delayed.

In many gardens, dill, fennel or parsley are planted especially to attract black swallowtail caterpillars that will develop into beautiful butterflies.



↑ Aphids come in a variety of colors, and they can suck the juice out of every part of a plant that is above ground.

➔ The voracious appetites of Japanese beetles and grasshoppers can ruin leaves of broadleaf herbs like mint.



Aphids are tiny sucking insects that come in a variety of colors and congregate in groups. Deformed plant growth is the first telltale sign of aphid feeding. A severely infested plant turns yellow and dies. Caraway, nasturtium and oregano tend to be very susceptible. Once identified, aphids may be washed away with a spray of water, but be sure not to damage the plants. For small potted plants, dip the foliage into a bucket of soapy water and swirl it around to dislodge and kill the aphids (keeping a hand pressed against the soil). To control high aphid populations, plants should be sprayed with insecticidal soap or an appropriate insecticide, with special attention to the undersides of leaves.

Not All Pests Are Insects

Two-spotted spider mites can be a significant problem on many of the mint-family herbs. Spider mites, related to spiders (not technically insects), are so small that they are difficult to see with the naked eye. Mites usually feed on the underside of leaves causing them to look speckled and silvery. Fine webbing envelopes the plant when their populations are very high. Hot, dry conditions are ideal for spider mites to thrive. To reduce spider mites, get rid of the webs as soon as noticed. If needed, spray the plants with insecticidal soap or alternately pull out the infested plants before the spider mites spread to other plants.

Night-attacking slugs and snails have a fondness for herbs, and devour huge sections of leaves in just a few hours. Consider baits containing iron phosphate or sprinkle the soil around the plant with diatomaceous earth to discourage slugs and snails.

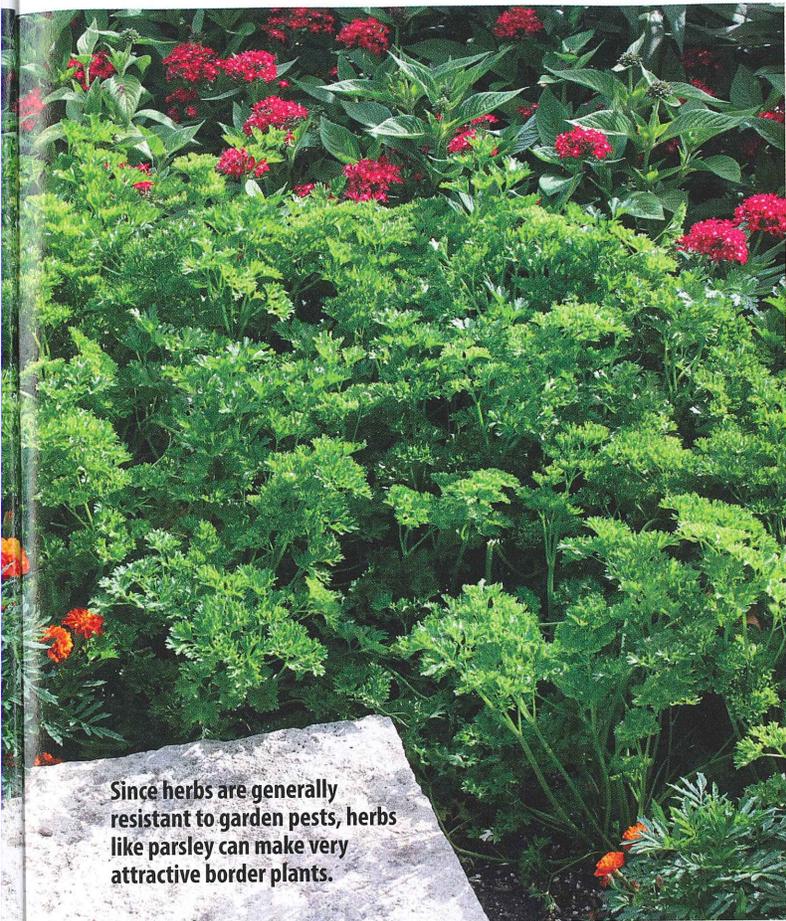
Planning to Start Your Herbs from Seed?

Late winter or early spring is when most gardeners start herb seedlings indoors, either for pots or in-ground planting. However, damping-off caused by soil-borne fungi can frustrate even experienced gardeners. There is nothing more tragic than to be tending beautiful seedlings one day, only to

find a collapsed rotting mess the next. The easiest way to prevent damping-off is to avoid overwatering. This fungal disease thrives when the potting soil remains moist for an extended period of time. Allow the soil to dry out between watering. Potting mixes containing peat or compost tend to hold more moisture, so consider "light" well-draining mixes containing perlite or vermiculite if damping-off has been a problem.

Herbs Are Not Immune to Disease

Foliar diseases, like rust and powdery mildew, do occasionally occur on mint, lemon balm, monarda and similar plants. Removing the infested plant parts and pruning adjacent plants to increase air circulation are usually effective in discouraging disease spread. Because mints are so persistent and propagate through underground runners, disease-infected plants can be cut back and allowed to regrow. Discard infected plant parts and do not compost them.



Since herbs are generally resistant to garden pests, herbs like parsley can make very attractive border plants.

Common disease prevention tips for all gardening also apply to herb gardening as well, even when grown in pots. Water plants at the base to avoid splashing water on leaves. Watering is best done in the morning to allow any water that might have splashed on foliage to dry during the day. Water left standing on foliage overnight encourages disease development. Space plants properly instead of overcrowding them, which does not allow for good air circulation and leaf drying.

Attentiveness Is the Key

Remember that all insects are not bad. Encourage beneficial insects that can help keep unwanted bugs under control. Ladybugs, lacewings and praying mantis can all help to control many of the pests including aphids and mites.

Because the leaves of herbs are used throughout the season, chemical sprays and dusts generally are not recommended. Removal of infested plants or use of organic materials, such as Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), insecticidal soaps, or a simple spray of water may be enough to wash away many pests. Pests and diseases commonly do not pose a major problem to herbs if common prevention practices and attentiveness you use. In most cases, your herb plants can be saved if you take action at first sight. ♡

Douglas A. Spilker, Ph.D., is a consulting ornamental plant pathologist and entomologist, garden writer and lecturer. Dr. Doug can be reached at askdroug@gmail.com.

DRAMM

Sprinklers



DRAMM

Professional Quality for Life
www.dramm.com

available at independent garden centers
 & online retailers