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**Rosemary December 2017**

Rosemary is an evergreen herb native to the Mediterranean coast which is steeped in traditions. It has been linked as a symbol of loyalty, friendship and remembrance, and has been traditionally carried the bride at her wedding and by mourners at funerals. Today, rosemary is now being used as a drought tolerant shrub as well as a culinary herb.

A member of the Labiatae or mint family, rosemary plants can be upright or prostrate in growth habit. Upright forms can grow to be 3 - 4 feet or taller after several years of growth. The prostrate or creeping forms are less winter hardy but only grow 8-10 inches tall but cascade along the ground. The stems of rosemary become woody with age and are covered with green needlelike foliage year-round, and have pale blue or white blooms in the winter and spring depending on the variety.

Rosemary plants can be planted in the ground or in containers. Most varieties will overwinter in the southern 2/3 of Arkansas just fine, but can be nipped back or killed in a severely cold winter up north, with even the potential for some die-back in central Arkansas. Although the northern tier can struggle growing rosemary as a permanent plant, many gardeners grow it as a short-lived perennial or a container plant that they protect in the winter months. There are numerous species of rosemary with a variability to winter hardiness. Arp and 'Madeline Hill' are two of the more cold-tolerant varieties for Arkansas. Often at garden centers the plants are labeled as Rosemary so the exact variety is not known. Rosemary can be used in a stand-alone herb garden, interspersed with other perennials and shrubs or used as a hedge.

As the holiday season approaches each fall, you will see offerings of Christmas tree or other topiary shapes of rosemary for sale. They can be hard to overwinter both indoors and out, since their pot size is relatively small making them less winter hardy, but growing rosemary indoors in the winter can be a challenge. Overwatering is a death knell, and the warm, yet low humidity environment indoors can be tough on the plants. If you do bring one inside, remove any foil wraps, and water sparingly. Place the plant in a sunny window in one of the coolest rooms of your house. Don't try to grow them indoors year-round. If you do choose to keep newly purchased plants outdoors, either plant in a larger container, or be prepared to move them to a sheltered location when the temperatures are much below freezing.

Most people buy rosemary plants, since growing them from seed is time-consuming. If you own a plant, they propagate readily from cuttings or more easily, layering. Place a low growing branch along the soil line, mound some soil over the stem and weight it down with a rock or brick. The part that is underground will produce roots. Once rooted, you can cut it off and have a new plant

Rosemary thrives in full sun, but will grow in partial shade, provided you have an extremely well-drained soil. Heavy soils will not give you great results. Some gardeners mulch their plants with coarse sand or chicken grit. If you have heavy soils, raise the level of planting. Winter drainage is also critical. If the plants stand in water, they won't last long. On the flip side, if our winters are particularly dry, watering prior to a cold snap can add to the plants hardiness. A dry plant has no buffer from freezing, while one with ample water in the system has a bit more protection.

Rosemary is used by many cooks for a wide array of recipes. From meat and potatoes, to salads, breads and even some desserts and drinks. It has an assertive flavor that unlike most other herbs is actually stronger fresh than after it has dried. Throw a few sprigs into your fireplace to spread the aroma, and once you strip the stems of the leaves, or if a plant dies, use the stems as skewer for shish-ka-bobs, imparting the flavor from the inside out to meats and vegetables. Since it is a permanent addition in most gardens, be careful when harvesting, judiciously removing stems from around the plant.

Rosemary is a great addition to any sunny garden. It's fragrant and useful foliage is great in the kitchen, but if you find a good spot for this plant, it can be as tough as it is useful. In addition the lovely small blooms which bloom intermittently fall through spring are enjoyed by bees. As with most herbs, it has very few pest problems, and will rarely be damaged by wildlife.

