



TOP LEFT Celery seed salt - herb specialist and grower, Jekka McVicar, crushes excess celery seed with sea salt (in a ratio of 2:5) with a pestle and mortar and stores it in the dark in airtight jars.

BELOW LEFT *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Tuscan Blue' has a straight erect habit, which Jekka says makes the stems 'ideal barbeque skewers'. RIGHT Golden bay, an alternative to the more common green-leaved sweet bay, is a great brightener of gloomy garden corners. OPPOSITE PAGE Jekka snips fresh leaves from sweet bay, *Laurus nobilis*, to make fresh bundles of bouquet garni.



Rosemary, bay & caraway

During the colder months, you'll still find tasty morsels in the herb garden to invigorate soups and stews, and awaken tired taste buds

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

Bay and rosemary are the indisputable stalwarts of the herb garden. Able to withstand all but the harshest weather, they are low maintenance and will provide a bounty of fresh pickings all year round, adding a distinctive flavour to seasonal dishes.

Bay is a great favourite of mine; I have a pair of evergreen lollipop bays, *Laurus nobilis*, also known as sweet bay or sweet laurel, which stand in containers by my front door. As well as being decorative, this Mediterranean herb adds a hint of nutmeg and citrus to food. It's always best picked fresh, even in winter, when it has more bite than dried leaves. Herb specialist Jekka McVicar believes that using it in cooking can help the digestion and absorption of food.

Though ideal as container plants, bays can be planted in the ground. However, they will grow surprisingly large, up to 8m tall, spreading for 3m, so do allow for this. The size of container-grown plants can be controlled more easily, and they can also be given some winter protection in extreme conditions. If you are looking for a shrub to cheer up a dark corner, golden bay - *Laurus nobilis* 'Aurea' - will provide a glow with yellow foliage, which has a milder flavour. ▶



Expert Advice

FROM JEKKA MCVICAR

Crowned the 'Queen of Herbs' by Jamie Oliver, Jekka has won 62 RHS Gold Medals, and has plenty of tips on growing:

BAY TREES

● **Propagation is hard** in the UK, so it's best to buy established plants.

● **Give young plants a chance** to get going - harvest lightly for the first two years.

● **Prune in autumn** to keep shape and restrict size. Bays in containers will have limited growth, otherwise they enjoy being pot bound, and benefit from a move to a cool place indoors in harsh winters. Feed through the summer growth period.

ROSEMARY

● **Propagate rosemary** by taking softwood cuttings in summer from new, non-flowering growth. Take 10-15cm cuttings with a clean sharp knife. Remove the needles from the lower two-thirds of the plant. Place four cuttings around the edge of a 7.5cm pot, in a standard potting compost and sharp sand mix. Place in a propagator or cover with plastic and place on a windowsill, away from direct light. After eight to 10 weeks, pot on individually. Transplant those with established root balls into open ground in late spring. Prune in autumn to maintain shape and size.

● **For containers**, use large, well-draining, deep pots and keep well watered in summer.



ABOVE Herbs smell wonderful when freshly picked. BELOW RIGHT Caraway, another great winter herb, offers flavour in seed form - great for spicing up tired old dishes. Jekka adds the seeds to her Sunday roast potatoes.

Rosemary is my other hardy evergreen must-have, which can also be decoratively grown - standard lollipop are great, but I definitely harvest too much and too frequently to succeed. *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Miss Jessopp's Upright' is recommended for standards, as the only variety liable not to wander off track. There are lots of different varieties, distinguished by habit (upright, arching, prostrate), 'needle' shape and the flower colours, which are typically gorgeous azure blues, such as in 'Tuscan Blue' and 'Sissinghurst Blue', but there is also 'Majorca Pink' and a white var. *albiflorus*. The blooms are apparent in spring and late summer. As long as you pick a *Rosmarinus officinalis*, you are in business in the kitchen too. But for an unusual flavour, try 'Green Ginger', an astonishing and warming blend of rosemary and ginger, brilliant with both meats and vegetables.

Though bay and rosemary are relatively hardy evergreens, pots may need winter protection. Bay does not react well to irregular watering, which causes browning of the leaf, as well as the pest, bay leaf sucker - a kind of hopping louse that causes leaf margins to curl before turning yellow. Rosemary may suffer from rosemary leaf beetle, an easily identified, metallic, green-striped, purple pest, who damages the new tips of plants. Both pests are best handpicked off or devoured by other wildlife - do what you can to encourage birds into your garden. Rosemary can also be attacked at the roots by honey fungus or root rot, caused either by a soil-borne fungus or overwatering. Either way, the plants are incurable and need disposing of. Both herbs prefer well-drained soil, but rosemary can cope with a heavy soil if in full sun.

If you are looking for a shrub to cheer up a dark corner, Laurus nobilis 'Aurea' will provide a glow with yellow foliage

Herb books, places & events

● **All the recipes in this feature are from Jekka's Herb Cookbook**, which is illustrated by her daughter Hannah. It contains lots of growing tips and notes on herbal properties as well as delicious recipes. Published by Ebury Press, £25.

● **Join Jekka** for courses and open days at her herb farm near Bristol. Forthcoming dates include 30 March-1 April. You can also buy herbs and more direct - for a mail-order brochure, call +44 (0)1454 418878 or order online at www.jekkasherbfarm.com

● **The Herb Festival at The Garden Museum**, Lambeth Palace Rd, London SE1 7LB on 3 June will include workshops, plant sales, advice and talks. Tel: +44 (0)20 7401 8865 or visit www.gardenmuseum.org.uk



Recipe 3 Jekka's caraway roast potatoes

Serves 4 people

16 small potatoes
2 tbsps olive oil
1 tbsp caraway seed
1 tsp salt
Freshly ground black pepper

- **Pre-heat oven** to 200°C.
- **Wash, dry** and pierce potatoes.
- **Toss potatoes in oil** in roasting tin and sprinkle with caraway seed, salt and black pepper.
- **Roast** for 35-45 minutes until golden and crisp.



Recipe 2 Jekka's rosemary bread

Makes 6 rolls (or 1 large loaf)

25g fresh yeast
Pinch of sugar
310ml warm water
500g white bread flour (plus extra for dusting)
1 tsp chopped rosemary leaves stripped from stems
2tsp salt
60ml olive oil

- **Pre-heat oven** to 200°C.
- **Put yeast and sugar** in a bowl, and stir in warm water.
- **Put flour in large bowl** and make a central well. Pour in the yeast, salt, most of the rosemary leaves and olive oil. Mix and then knead dough for 10 minutes to a smooth, elastic ball.
- **Cover with a damp tea towel** and leave in a warm place to rise (approx 1.5 hours or until doubled in size).
- **Flour work surface**, divide dough into six balls, sprinkle the tops with remaining rosemary and drizzle with remaining oil.
- **Place rolls**, allowing for spread, on flour-dusted baking sheet. Cover loosely with a tea towel and leave in a warm place again for 30-60 minutes until risen.
- **Bake in the oven** for approx. 35 minutes, until golden. Cool before serving. Delicious with soups or salads.

Recipe 4 Jekka's celery salt seasoning

Perfect for Bloody Marys!

2 tbsp celery seed
2 tbsp sea salt

- **Ensure seeds are clean** and dry.
- **Combine with sea salt** in a processor or pestle and mortar.
- **Store** in an airtight jar. ♦



Recipe 1 Jekka McVicar's bouquet garni

This is a standard bouquet garni for meat or a chicken casserole, but you can add other herbs to suit your taste.

2-3 bay leaves
1 bunch parsley
3 sprigs thyme
1 peeled garlic clove

- **Simply take the parsley**, thyme and garlic, and wrap it in a folded bay leaf, tying with unwaxed kitchen string to secure. Dangle bouquet garni in your casserole as it cooks, and remove before serving.