

The Delights of Dill

Herb of the year spices up gardens as well as food

By Anne Carver

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*) is a magical multi-faceted herb. So, it came as no surprise when this herb was named “Herb of the Year” for 2010 by the Florida-based International Herb Association.

Early in life, I encountered dill as a tummy tamer. When I had an upset stomach, my Grandmother brought me freshly-made, warm, dill bread, and I was instantly cured. This bread was no ordinary bread. Light as air, made with cottage cheese and yeast, and laced with dill seeds, it was a slice of heaven. Dill has a distinctive taste - tangy and fresh - somehow like tasting the smell of fresh cut grass mixed with a touch of licorice and caraway.

Later research confirmed what my troubled tummy knew: The essential oils in dill stimulate the digestive process. However, there are more than stomach-soothing properties to this historical, water-wise herb.

The word dill comes from the Norse word *dilla*, meaning to lull or to soothe. Not surprisingly, dill tea has been used to overcome insomnia. One of the earliest known herbs, it was used by Egyptians to treat coughs and headaches more than 5,000 years ago. In ancient Greece and Rome, soldiers placed burned dill seeds on their wounds to promote healing.

In medieval Europe, dill was one of the most popular herbs. Its leaves and seeds were the key ingredients in love potions and perfumes of all types, and dill was used to protect against witchcraft. Dill seeds were soaked in wine and enthusiastically consumed as a medieval Viagra.

Early colonists in America gave their children dill seeds to chew on during long meetings to keep them from getting antsy or hungry. Thus, dill began to be called the “Meeting House Seed.” Chewing on dill seeds also freshen the breath.

For Cooks and Gardeners

Today, dill has been replaced by chewing gum, but in the kitchen it still adds magic to many dishes. Unfortunately, it is not found in most gardens. Indeed, when someone says “dill,” most people instantly think *pickle* not *plant*. However, dill is as flexible and useful in the garden as it is in the kitchen.

Like most herbs, dill is drought-tolerant once established, and amazingly pest free. Furthermore, dill’s long, ferny fronds make an excellent addition to floral arrangements. The large, wheel-like flower heads are covered with tiny, edible, yellow blossoms that look - and taste - incredible when sprinkled over salad or pasta. This herb grows to four feet tall and brings a stately presence to the garden. If you garden in containers, ‘Fernleaf’ is the smallest variety of dill; it only gets 18 inches tall.

To grow this ideal annual, keep in mind it is a cool season herb. In San Diego, this means the seeds are best sown in late fall to late winter. However, you can successfully grow a later



Photo: Anne Carver

crop; just expect dill to “bolt” quickly. (The term “bolt” means the plant’s growth accelerates rapidly from mostly leaf-based to being flower- and seed-based.) Some varieties of dill, like ‘Dukat,’ are slow to bolt. If you are planting later, look on the seed packet for this important feature.

The downside of bolting is that an annual like dill dies after it sets seed. But, you can harvest the seeds to use in savory dishes, or save the seeds for next year’s crop.

Dill quickly develops a long taproot and dislikes being transplanted, so it is best grown from seed. Fortunately, seeds start readily when scattered in the garden. In our mild climate, you can sow seeds in mid to late fall, and when conditions are just right, they will suddenly sprout. Aim to sow seeds in well draining soil where they receive full sunlight. Dill struggles in partial shade and heavy soil. When planting, cover the seeds very lightly since they need light to germinate. After dill is up and growing, it survives on scant water.

Baby dill is attractive to birds, slugs and snails. To prevent your dill from becoming a critter’s snack, place several open-weave, berry baskets upside down over the newly sown seeds. Remove the baskets when the seedlings begin to press against them. Many gardeners simply plant extra seeds, and plenty of hardy dill plants survive.

As soon as dill begins to get its needle-like foliage, snip leaves to use in sauces, salads, dips, vegetables, eggs and fish recipes. For best cooking results with dill, be sure to use fresh leaves, because

when dried they become nearly tasteless. To harvest the seeds, leave the flowers on and wait until the tips of the seeds turn light brown. Then, shake the seeds on to a newspaper or into a paper bag and store them in a glass container (metal or plastic alters the taste).

The herb of the year is an exuberant, useful garden addition. Unlike most plants, dill fits into many styles of gardens. Plant a row of dill against a wall or fence and cover the soil with tiny pebbles to get a modern, tailored look. Or, for a more country feel, place a couple plants in the back of a border filled with casual flowers like feverfew, rudbeckia, larkspur and sages. Dill even looks at home mixed in with roses and daisies in a lush English/cottage garden.

Dill is for more than curing pickles. Dill will fill in a ho-hum, water-wise border, provide help for insomnia, calm an achy stomach, and . . . it's dill-icious.



Nana Carlson's Dilly Bread

This bread soothes stomachs and it pairs well with salad and soup.

¼ cup warm water
1 package dry yeast
1 cup cottage cheese, room temperature
2 tablespoons sugar
1 tablespoon minced onion
1 tablespoon butter, softened

2 tablespoons dill seeds
¼ teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1 egg
2 to 2 ½ cups flour

Soften yeast in warm water. Combine cottage cheese, sugar, onion, butter, dill seeds, salt, soda, egg, and yeast. Add the flour. The dough should be sticky, but not too moist. Give it a light kneading; that is all this dough requires.

Set aside to rise until doubled in size - about an hour. Punch down and give a quick knead on a floured surface. Place in a round casserole baking dish and let rise again 30-40 minutes.

Bake at 350 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes.

– Aenne Carver

Aenne Carver is a Master Gardener, writer and lecturer. Visit her Web site, www.thethriftygardener.com