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PRODUCTION GUIDELINES / SOUTH AFRICA

Herbs



GROW THE RIGHT SPECIES. PRESERVE THE AROMA.

A practical guide to culinary herbs, with separate crop profiles, fresh and dried market planning, clean harvests and species-specific cooling.

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PLAN THE HERB RANGE

Identify the product first

Scope: culinary leaves, stems and selected seed crops. Essential-oil, medicinal and ornamental production require their own buyer specifications and specialist programmes.

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Fresh bunches	Agree species, cultivar, aroma, stem length, bunch mass, cleanliness and delivery frequency.
Fresh packed leaves	Confirm leaf size, trimming, pack mass, temperature and expected selling window.
Dried herbs / seed	Agree accepted plant part, purity, moisture or water activity, microbial limits, packaging and testing with the processor.
Live plants	Plan pot size, plant health, labelling and retail watering separately from cut-herb harvests.
Trial scale	Grow small batches, send samples and calculate accepted output before expanding the range.

Use botanical names in crop records

Common names can conceal different species or chemotypes. Buy identified planting material and retain its lot details. Keep ornamental and food crops clearly separated; attractive foliage alone does not establish culinary suitability.

Group by water and market needs

Tender leafy herbs and woody Mediterranean herbs have different moisture and drainage needs. Give each group a suitable irrigation zone. Record labour and pack losses by species rather than averaging the whole herb range. [1]

Range decision: this guide excludes pennyroyal from culinary production. Its oil is highly toxic and tea exposures have caused poisoning; it must not be treated as interchangeable with culinary mint. [12]

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TENDER ANNUAL HERBS

Plan leaves and seed separately

Basil, coriander, dill and fennel serve different products. Write the intended plant part into every order and harvest instruction.

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Sweet / bush basil	Ocimum basilicum types need a warm, frost-free window. Select the buyer's aroma and leaf type; manage flowering according to the leaf product. Start from healthy identified seed or plants. [1, 2]
Coriander / cilantro	Coriandrum sativum supplies fresh leaves or dry seed. Cooler conditions favour the leaf crop; heat accelerates bolting. Use successive small sowings for leaf continuity. [3]
Dill	Anethum graveolens can be sold as tender foliage, flowering heads or seed. These are different harvest stages. Direct sowing is useful where transplanting would disturb roots. [2, 4]
Florence fennel	Select a bulb-forming Foeniculum vulgare type for swollen leaf bases. Do not expect ordinary herb fennel to produce the same vegetable. [5]
Herb fennel	Agree leaves or seed as the product and allow room for taller growth. Keep its harvest and sales plan separate from Florence fennel. [5]

Test the succession interval locally

Record days to the actual grade, accepted mass and the date quality declines. Adjust sowing frequency to the season and order pattern. A fixed weekly sowing interval may overproduce in warm weather or leave gaps in slow growth.

Basil logistics: arrange a separate temperature plan before planting. Basil is chilling-sensitive and should not be handled like cold-tolerant parsley or chives. [10]

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CRESSES & LEAFY HERBS

Keep crop identity explicit

A salad-herb range may include cresses, rocket and parsley. Use a separate labelled block and harvest record for each species.

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Watercress	Nasturtium officinale is a moisture-loving crop. Use a controlled production system with suitable water quality; a natural stream is not automatically a safe edible-crop source. [6]
Garden cress	Lepidium sativum is the quick leafy cress often grown in trays or beds. Do not label it as watercress or assume all “cress” seed is the same crop. [6]
Land cress	The common name is used for other cresses. Verify the botanical identity on the seed specification before developing the crop or product label.
Rocket	Confirm cultivated rocket (Eruca species) or wild rocket (Diplotaxis species) with the supplier. Trial flavour, leaf shape, regrowth and local bolting response.
Parsley	Petroselinum crispum includes flat and curly types. Order the required leaf form and allow for establishment time before promising regular bunch harvests. [7]

Separate edible leaves from sprouts

A short-cycle leaf crop grown in substrate is not the same process as producing sprouts. Set the intended product, harvest method and food-safety controls before selecting trays, seed and equipment.

Choose clean harvest conditions

Use clean cutting tools and containers and prevent soil or nutrient solution from contaminating packed leaves. Keep harvest batches identifiable and reject decayed material before it enters a mixed product.

Buyer sample: show the named species, leaf size and actual pack. Obtain acceptance before substituting another crop with a similar common name.

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CHIVES & MINT

Manage persistent plants

Perennial herbs can support repeated cutting, but plant health, identity and bed renewal still need a written plan.

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Onion chives	Allium schoenoprasum has tubular leaves. Confirm leaf length and bunch specification; retain healthy basal growth for recovery.
Garlic chives	Allium tuberosum has flatter leaves and a different flavour. Keep it separate in labels and harvest orders.
Propagation	Chives may be grown from seed or divided clumps. Use clean identified stock and inspect new plantings before mixing them with established beds. [7]
Culinary mint	Select a named culinary mint, such as spearmint or peppermint, for the required flavour. Vegetative propagation preserves a chosen type better than an unverified mixed seed source.
Containment	Mint spreads readily. Use a defined bed or container system and prevent unwanted mixing between varieties. [1, 7]

Schedule regrowth, not just cutting

Record each cut, accepted mass, leaf quality and the recovery period. Investigate weak regrowth through root condition, moisture, nutrition and disease before increasing the cutting frequency.

Do not treat all mints as food

Keep novelty, fragrance and ornamental mint types outside the culinary programme until identity and intended food use are verified. Pennyroyal is specifically excluded; the original broad mint grouping is not an acceptable food-crop specification. [12]

Renewal record: mother-stock identity / propagation date / bed age / cut dates / regrowth quality / disease history / replacement plan.

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WOODY & MEDITERRANEAN HERBS

Prioritise drainage and identity

Rosemary, sage, marjoram, oregano and lavender differ from tender annual leaf crops. Plan for mature canopy size and long-term bed access.

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Rosemary	Salvia rosmarinus, formerly Rosmarinus officinalis. Provide sun and good drainage; use identified material for consistent market quality. [8]
Culinary sage	Salvia officinalis is the culinary crop. Do not assume every ornamental Salvia can replace it. [9]
Marjoram / oregano	Keep Origanum majorana and oregano types distinct. Confirm the buyer's flavour and accepted leaf-to-stem proportion. [1, 7]
Lavender	Choose the species and cultivar for a defined market: culinary flowers, dried stems, ornamentals or oil. Common "English", "French" and "Spanish" labels are insufficient for a commercial specification. [7]

Establish a trial before permanent beds

Review local drainage, winter conditions and summer humidity. Use healthy propagation material, avoid crowding and retain access for harvest and inspection. Do not apply a tender-basil irrigation schedule to a woody herb bed. [1, 8]

Harvest to the buyer's plant part

Specify tender shoots, leaves, flowering stems or another accepted part. Assess woody material and aroma before grading. Essential-oil output and composition need their own trial and laboratory assessment; no oil-yield promise is made here.

Bed investment: confirm plant identity, market, expected productive life, harvest method and replacement cost before establishing a large perennial block.

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ESTABLISHMENT & INPUTS

Build a separate crop plan

There is no single spacing, fertiliser rate or irrigation programme for all herbs. Use the crop profile, production system and buyer specification together.

Prepare the root zone

Check drainage, soil fertility and irrigation-water quality. Many culinary herbs suit well-drained soil; select amendments from testing. Keep moisture-loving crops separate from those that decline in wet ground. [1]

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Seeded annuals	Check lot germination, sowing depth and actual emergence. Use a calibration strip before a large direct sowing.
Cuttings and divisions	Label mother stock and batches. Inspect roots and foliage and keep suspect material separate.
Spacing	Set rows for mature canopy, machinery and hygienic harvesting. Record planted area separately from paths.
Nutrition	Base inputs on the actual crop and tests. Excess feeding can produce soft growth and poor flavour; do not assume maximum leaf growth means best market quality. [1]
Irrigation	Measure emitter output and root-zone moisture. Record rain and irrigation together and correct uneven delivery before adding runtime.

Measure accepted output

Track accepted fresh mass, stems removed, rejected leaves, drying loss and labour separately. These records reveal whether a species or pack format is viable under the farm’s conditions.

Trial ledger: crop / batch / area / input cost / labour / harvested mass / accepted mass / customer feedback / next adjustment.

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CROP HEALTH & HYGIENE

Inspect before each harvest

Scout each species separately. Similar yellowing may reflect root stress, disease, nutrition or pest injury; a mixed herb bed can hide the pattern.

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Young planting material	Inspect new batches for insects, leaf spots and weak roots. Retain supplier and propagation records.
Foliar disease	Record the crop, affected leaf surfaces, distribution and recent humidity. Obtain diagnosis before choosing a treatment.
Insects and mites	Inspect leaf undersides and growing tips. Identify the pest and assess actual damage, including contamination of harvested leaves.
Cutting tools and packs	Keep clean tools, food-contact surfaces and containers separate from crop waste and soil.
Worker and water hygiene	Provide handwashing and use water suitable for the operation. A wash step is not a substitute for preventing contamination.

Check every named crop on the label

Herbs are not automatically one pesticide-registration group. Verify current South African approval for the actual crop, target and use, observe intervals and keep treatment records. Confirm customer and export residue requirements before application. [13]

Protect repeat harvests

Mark treated beds and state the earliest permitted cutting date clearly. Keep incompatible lots separate. Review whether the selected intervention fits the next planned delivery rather than treating by a routine calendar.

Hold a suspect lot: identify it, keep it out of dispatch, document the issue and release only after the responsible person has resolved the concern.

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FRESH HARVEST & COOLING

Preserve aroma and texture

Harvest to the agreed stage, remove damaged material and move the crop out of direct sun. Record product temperature, not only the cold-room setting.

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Most culinary herbs	UC Davis uses about 0°C and more than 95% relative humidity for many fresh herbs. Confirm suitability for the actual species and pack. [10]
Basil	Keep above 10°C to avoid chilling injury. Plan a separate storage and transport arrangement from herbs requiring near-freezing conditions. [10]
Aroma	A herb can lose characteristic aroma before looking unmarketable. Include smell and intended culinary quality in retained-sample checks. [10]
Moisture	Limit wilting without leaving free water in packs. Check condensation, ventilation and compression.
Delivery	Use lot codes and a short, validated selling window. Species, harvest stage and temperature history affect performance.

Define the wash and pack process

Agree whether the product is unwashed, washed or ready-to-eat. For food-contact washing or processing, use a documented hygiene system and validate the finished pack’s shelf life. Keep wash-water quality and sanitation records.

Retain a trial sample

Inspect the actual pack through the expected delivery and sale period. Record wilting, blackening, decay, aroma and customer acceptance. Do not transfer one herb’s maximum storage life to a mixed range.

Dispatch record: species / block / cut date and time / pack / temperature / quantity / customer / selling window.

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DRYING & BUSINESS REVIEW

Treat drying as a process

A dried-herb business needs a defined product and controlled handling. Drying is not a way to recover mouldy or contaminated raw material.

Use clean, sound raw herbs

Sort and prepare the accepted plant part. Use a suitable drying method and airflow; thick stems and succulent leaves may dry differently. Protect material from dust, pests and recontamination. [11]

Decision / crop	Practical guidance
Drying programme	Set temperature, loading and duration for the crop and equipment through a validated process; avoid a single universal temperature recipe.
Endpoint	Agree moisture or water-activity limits and sampling with the buyer or food technologist. Texture alone is insufficient for commercial release.
Cooling and packing	Cool dried material before sealing, then protect it from moisture uptake, light and oxygen as appropriate. [11]
Identity and testing	Keep species and lots separate. Confirm required microbial, residue and foreign-matter checks with the customer.
Oil or extract products	Use a separate specialist process and specification. This crop guide does not establish a safe shelf-stable herb oil, extract or medicinal product.

Review the whole product cost

Calculate the cost per accepted packed unit after trimming, drying and rejection. Include energy, testing, packaging and labour. Compare that result with the confirmed selling price before increasing the planted area.

Release checklist: correct species / accepted raw lot / drying record / endpoint verified / clean packaging / lot label / customer specification met.

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FILLABLE CROP PLANNER

Your next planting

Save a copy before filling it in. Use a PDF reader that supports forms and keep the completed record with your field documents.

Farm / block / previous crop

Botanical name / cultivar / planting lot

Sowing or propagation / planned cut dates

Bed layout / spacing / planted area

Buyer / fresh, dried or seed / pack

Soil and water results / nutrient plan

Next action / responsible person / due date

Ready-to-plant checks

- [ ] Species and market confirmed
- [ ] Planting stock checked
- [ ] Irrigation zones planned
- [ ] Crop protection reviewed
- [ ] Hygiene process ready
- [ ] Species cooling arranged

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REFERENCES & EDITION NOTES

Sources you can follow

Independent sources reviewed on 17 September 2026. Links are clickable. Older sources support established principles; overseas dates and product approvals are not transferred to South Africa.

01. UMN Extension - Growing Herbs
Independent production and handling reference.

02. USU - Culinary Herbs (2026)
Independent production and handling reference.

03. USU - Cilantro / Coriander
Independent production and handling reference.

04. USU - Dill
Independent production and handling reference.

05. USU - Fennel
Independent production and handling reference.

06. USU - Watercress
Independent production and handling reference.

07. NC State - Herb Selection (legacy reference)
Independent production and handling reference.

08. NC State - Rosemary
Independent production and handling reference.

09. NC State - Culinary Sage
Independent production and handling reference.

10. UC Davis - Fresh Culinary Herbs (2001)
Independent production and handling reference.

11. Penn State - Drying Herbs
Independent production and handling reference.

12. Poison Control - Pennyroyal Oil
Safety correction: pennyroyal is excluded from this culinary crop range.

13. SA Department of Agriculture - Residue requirements
Check crop-specific approvals, records and destination requirements.

About this edition. Original AgriCart editorial synthesis for planning and education. Obtain farm-specific advice before setting inputs and crop-protection programmes. No yield or shelf-life guarantee is implied. Cover image is AI-generated illustration, not a documented farm or named cultivar. Source organisations do not endorse AgriCart.