

TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION



Thai Basil Growing Guide **Collin County Master Gardeners Association** <http://collin-tx.tamu.edu> * Collin@ag.tamu.edu

Thai Basil (*Ocimum basilicum* var. *tenuifolium*) is a tender perennial (grown as an annual in North Texas) that grows up to one foot tall and wide. The narrow leaves are about half the size of common sweet basil leaves. The purple tinged stems offer a nice contrast to the bright green leaves with purple veins. The foliage is very aromatic, with a strong, spicy flavor with hints of anise. When the plant matures, it produces spikes of lavender and deep purple flowers that have the same flavor as the leaves and are attractive as a garnish.

All basil plants are warm season plants and are hardy only in very warm climates where there is no chance of frost. It is best planted in North Texas in late spring to early summer when the soil has fully warmed to 70° and the weather has settled (even one 50° night will slow the plant's growth).

Choose a site that provides 6-8 hours of direct sun each day. Soil should be rich and well drained. Add a generous amount of compost or other organic matter to the planting site and work two teaspoons of a well balanced fertilizer per square foot into the soil prior to planting.

Thai Basil can be planted by direct seeding or purchasing transplants. To get a jump on the season, start seeds indoors 3-4 weeks before planting time. Plant 4-6 seeds per cell and when seedlings have their first set of true leaves, thin to 1-2 seedlings per cell. Take the time to harden off plants before setting in the garden, and protect plants from wind and sun for the first several days.

The seed is tiny, so the best method is to scatter the seed on turned soil that has been raked smooth, then gently rake the seed into the soil, making sure that it is no deeper than ¼" below the surface. Or scatter the seed and cover lightly with seed starting mix. Water gently and carefully and keep the soil moist until the seeds germinate. Seeds germinate in 8-14 days; when the first true set of leaves appear, thin the seedlings to 12-18" apart by clipping the extras at the soil line (don't pull out the seedlings as they may affect the root system of the nearby seedlings). Transplants should be placed 12-18" apart in holes that are the same size as the existing root ball.

Thai basil prefers moist, but not wet soil. Water plants weekly at the base to keep the water off the leaves. Seek a balance as too much water will cause the leaves to yellow and drop and under-watering will make flowers and buds suffer.

To get the highest yield of tender and flavorful leaves, pinch the tip of each branch when the plants are 6" to encourage a sturdy and bushy plant. When 10-12" tall, begin harvesting the growing tips and several sets of leaves as needed. Harvest early in the morning when leaves are turgid (filled with water). To store, place the cut ends in a glass of water, much like a bouquet of flowers. The glass can be left on the counter to use as needed. Do not refrigerate clippings or the leaves will wilt and discolor.

The secrets to growing Thai basil are warm soil temperature, weekly watering, and frequent harvesting. Consider growing Thai basil. You'll be happy with the flavor it brings to your table.