

THYME ON

Get a real taste for what's in this season with Diarmuid's top herbs for your pots and plates

Gardening is full of personalities and one of the people I look forward to seeing at shows such as Chelsea, Hampton Court or Gardeners' World Live is Jekka McVicar.

In short, she's the queen of herbs with a farm dedicated to growing the most aromatic varieties of plants we love to use for cooking and remedies – her farm in Gloucestershire has the largest collection of culinary herbs growing in the UK.

She's a cheerful professor type with a broad grin and naughty twinkle in the eye. Her exhibits and displays are nothing if not fabulous

and her passion for so many varieties of herbs is evident in her new collection of seeds in conjunction with Johnsons – Jekka's Herbs.

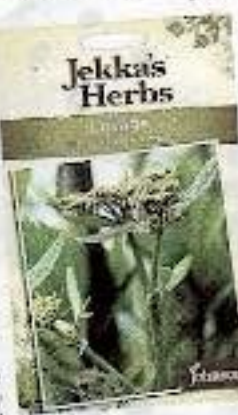
All the classic herbs are there as well as some less commonly grown ones which are going to be the 'in' flavours for 2016.

So what herbs do you need to be cultivating to be on trend this year?

Lovage, *Levisticum officinale*, is a wonderfully old-fashioned herb that has a strong flavour, a bit like celery and makes a great accompaniment to new potages, soups and stews.

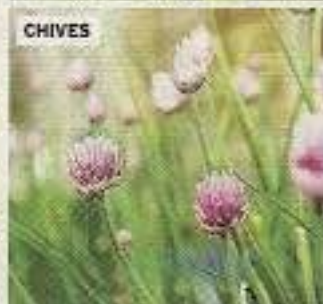
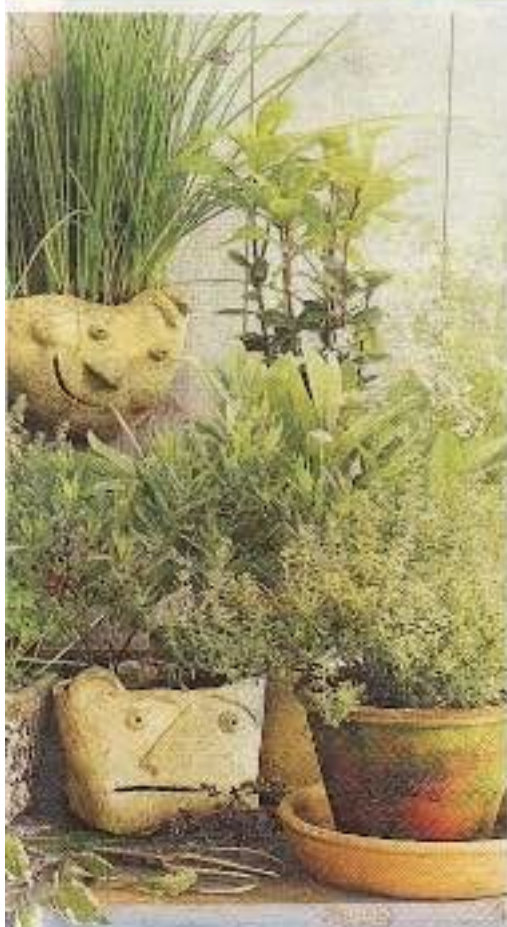
It's a perennial that would not look out of place in your ornamental borders with architectural foliage and tubular flowers.

You do need space as this can grow



AROMATIC Lovage has a strong celery-like flavour

GARDEN with DIARMUID G



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Glamorgan,
Cecil's, near
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YOUR HANDS

up to 6ft high and spread as wide over five years. Sow seed now thinly in trays of seed compost and then cover again with another fine layer.

Moisten, cover with glass or polythene and keep at around 15C – seeds should germinate in two to three weeks.

When large enough, transplant into small pots and then gradually acclimatise to outdoor conditions. Unlike many herbs, lovage is happy enough with a bit of shade (£2.35 for a packet containing 120 seeds).

Summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*) is another overlooked herb. Slightly peppery leaves can be used to jazz up a salad and as seasoning. It's a tender annual with charming little lilac flowers in summer.

You can sow straight outdoors now – thinly in rows a foot apart, covering lightly with soil. When large enough, thin out to about 10cm apart. Sow regularly for continuous croppings (£2.35 for 150).

But don't forget the classics either, such as parsley, which is so versatile in cooking. There's an old wives' tale about only sowing

parsley seeds on Good Friday, but as this date is a movable feast, it doesn't make sense from a horticultural point of view.

Seeds can be sown under cover as early as March for transplanting outdoors after frost. However, they are quite tricky to germinate – they need warmth and some

Mediterranean shrubs like sage and marjoram prefer free-draining soil

gardeners swear by soaking them in tepid water before sowing. You're probably better off buying small pots and planting these in the garden.

Parsley is not like the Mediterranean herbs that like poor soil – it enjoys a good fertile soil and a monthly liquid feed. Although it's a biennial, it's best planted fresh every year.

Herbs are generally easy to cultivate. What they mostly require is a bit of heat and

sunshine. Their beauty is their resilience through the growing season.

They might not be the showiest plants in terms of colour (although a carpet of thyme in full flower is a sight to behold), but they reward in terms of their interest, textural oddities and the smell and taste they bring to your life.

Many of them will do in sparse conditions as long as there's sun. The Mediterranean shrubs such as tarragon, marjoram, thyme, sage and rosemary all prefer poor free draining soil and don't like their roots sitting in water.

If your garden soil is unsuitable, you can grow them in containers, mixing grit through compost to ensure good drainage. Others, such as parsley, chives, mint and fennel, prefer a richer soil and will grow happily alongside your potatoes and cabbage. Mint is notoriously invasive so always keep this confined to a pot!

For more information on herb seeds, visit jekkasherbfarm.com and www.johnsonseeds.com.