

Production of Herbs in Asia: An Overview

Narong Chomchalow
Office of the President, Assumption University
Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract

Herbs are leafy or soft flowering parts of plants used to add flavor and/or aroma to food and beverage. In addition to flavoring food and beverages, herbs are also used as medicine, cosmetics, dyes, air fresheners, disinfectants, insect repellants, decorative materials, herbal drinks and teas, and pot pourri.

Herb cultivation in Asia is characterized by subsistence, mixed cropping systems, labor intensive, use of primitive cultivars, and improper post-harvest treatments. Genetic improvement of herbs is accomplished by introduction from other countries, selection from already existing variants, traditional breeding, and biotechnological methods. Factors affecting their productivity are soil structure and fertility, sunlight, temperature, and pest control. Herbs are very delicate, perishable crops which require special post-harvest handling to obtain high quality of fresh herbs.

The present paper describes the cultivation of important herbs of Asia, namely: basil, celery, coriander, curly leaf, dill, holy basil, lemongrass, marjoram, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, savory, shallot, tarragon, and thyme.

Keywords: *Herbs, flavor, aroma, cultivation, perishable, basil, celery, coriander, curly leaf, dill, holy basil, lemongrass, marjoram, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, savory, shallot, tarragon, thyme.*

Introduction

What are Herbs?

Herbs mean different things to different people. To the botanists, they are plants with soft stems (i.e. non-woody) which die down after flowering. To the laymen as well as the herbalists, they are plants that can be used to cure ailments; thus, they are synonymous with medicinal plants.

In this paper, however, herbs are defined as “leafy or soft flowering parts of plants used to add flavor and / or aroma to food and beverage”. These are normally known as ‘culinary or kitchen herbs’, in contrast to other herbs which are used for different purposes, such as medicinal herbs, cosmetic herbs, sweet herbs, salad herbs, etc. (See box on page 96 for description of terms having the word ‘herb’ as a part). The list of plants used as herbs is given in Appendix 1.

Importance of Herbs

The flavor and the aroma of a given dish, be it a famous French or Italian cuisine, or, for that matter, a less famous oriental dish, depend very much on flavorings and seasonings derived from herbs and spices. Both herbs and spices can give the simplest of foods a variety of flavors such that these foods can be served time and again in so many ways that one never gets tired of them. The story of spices as well as that of related plants, aromatic plants, has already been published (Chomchalow 2001; and Chomchalow 2002). The present publication concentrates on ‘herbs’ in Asia.

Asian peoples, particularly Southeast and South Asian, are very fond of herbs. The Asian traditions of using herbs are based on centuries of trial and error. The accepted recipes were then passed on from generation to generation, many of which have been modified