

Fresh, frilled & flavoursome

Parsley is often thought to be difficult to maintain in gardens. Sarah Wain offers some tips for growing a year-round supply and examines the results of a recent trial of curled-leaf cultivars. Photography by Tim Sandall

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR kitchen staples, parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) is a culinary herb in the carrot family, *Apiaceae*, with curly, flat-leaved and giant selections. An integral ingredient in many delicious dishes from around the world, it is a biennial, and generally hardy, although more commonly grown as an annual. If I could grow only one herb, I would have to choose parsley. Native to central and southern Europe, especially around the Mediterranean, parsley needs more moisture than many

herbs and is often mistakenly planted in well-drained herb garden beds where it can struggle alongside more drought-tolerant plants. Grown like a vegetable in the cultural conditions of a well-tended kitchen garden, however, it offers a profligate abundance that is invaluable to keen cooks. Parsley can be grown successfully in containers if kept watered, as well as in open ground, or as a green edging in flower gardens.

Growing techniques

Parsley plants will usually stay in good condition for about five months, so, for a year-round crop, sow at two different times: in January, for summer supplies, and in July, to overwinter. Sow fresh seed onto an all-purpose compost in small pots, trays or module trays, then cover with a thin layer of vermiculite. Gentle heat, around 15°C (59°F), speeds up germination, but is not vital. More importantly, keep the compost moist at all times, as drought will compromise successful germination.

When large enough to handle, prick out seedlings into smaller pots, or pot up the small plugs. It is often thought that parsley does not thrive after being pricked out, probably because of root damage; if, however, the seedlings are

young enough when moved, and are kept moist in a well-drained medium, there should be no problem.

At West Dean Gardens, where I work, we prefer to prick out three seedlings into a 9cm (3½in) diameter pot and grow the whole lot on as one plant, giving much more abundant growth as a result. Harden-off the plants from the winter sowing before planting outside in March. At this stage, some protection is advisable, using a cold frame, poly-tunnel or some sort of cloche.

Parsley thrives in a sunny position, tolerating light summer shade, in a fertile garden soil that has sufficient moisture but that drains well. To feed all our herbs we use seaweed extract, and to help keep plants producing new leaves we harvest stems regularly.

Ideal conditions

Last summer, at West Dean Gardens, we trialed a wide selection of parsleys, and will do so again this year. In 2009, of the curled selections, we planted out 10 plants of 10 cultivars, 25cm (10in) apart in rows. The soil had been enriched with compost the preceding spring, providing a spongy, well-drained but water-retentive substrate to which the plants responded well.

Despite there being little variation in the vigour of the plants, with no disease problems noted, there were some slight colour variations. There was also some discernible difference in their eating qualities, due to the range of curliness of the leaves – ‘Favorit’ being one of the coarser selections and ‘Lisette’ one of the finest. These variations were not seen as problems – all gave a satisfactory parsley flavour, some more intense than others. By mid-May some plants were bolting due to early-season drought, but by removing flowering stems and watering plants well, many more weeks of harvestable leaves were achieved.

Visiting gardeners frequently told us that all the parsley cultivars in our trial are worth growing. We agreed, and most of them will be growing in the gardens at West Dean again this year. ■

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i Suppliers include: Mr Fothergill’s, 0845 3710518; Thompson & Morgan, 0844 2485383; Edwin Tucker & Sons, 01364 652233; Suttons, 0844 922 0606. ● RHS Members can visit West Dean Gardens free of charge (Member 1 only) from Nov–Mar. See *RHS Members’ Handbook*, p78

PARSLEY CULTIVARS GROWN AT WEST DEAN

Boxed numbers refer to the following cultivars of parsley trialed in 2009:

- 1 **‘Moss Curled’:** fresh pea-green leaves that produced a neat moss effect; a standard market strain of triple-curved parsley
- 2 **‘Envy’:** reliable, well-curved, flavoursome cultivar that has been around for a long time; good for decorative green edgings to a flower garden
- 3 **‘Robust’:** dark green, densely-curved leaves on strong stems; slightly coarser than ‘Opal’
- 4 **Green Pearl** (‘Grüne Perle’): mid-green leaf with a tighter curl than ‘Afrodite’ or ‘Bravour’; some variation noted in trialed plants
- 5 **‘Opal’:** loose, coarse curl, with some plants bolting; we noted some variation in development
- 6 **‘Bravour’:** dark green leaves, similar to ‘Aphrodite’ but with a looser curl
- 7 **‘Rosette’:** not as coarse as ‘Robust’, perfectly satisfactory cultivar, with some plants bolting
- 8 **‘Lisette’:** rich green leaves with a fine curl and vigorous stems; showed no yellowing or bolting
- 9 **‘Favorit’:** coarse, curled cultivar, with an intense flavour; useful for potager gardens; dark leaves, although the curl has light highlights
- 10 **‘Afrodite’:** mid-green curly leaf; we found that it grew well and uniformly

For showing, try ‘Faulds’ (not included in the trial). Much slower to germinate and develop than the other cultivars, it makes an extremely uniform plant, with a tighter curl, looking rather like green velvet.

