

# Buzz on herb spirals: efficient elegance



## Permaculture in Practice

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In this post-hippie world, the term "herb spiral" may be unfortunate. For clarity's sake, just avoid any visions of Governor Johnson dancing with Jerry Garcia.

The kind of herb spiral I'm pushing is a graceful garden feature for almost any patch of flat, sunny ground. Picture a planting bed coiled up like a cinnamon roll, with a high point in the middle.

Herb spirals are one of the most efficient, productive, beautiful and elegant of all permaculture pattern applications. They're efficient because they create one place where all of your culinary herbs can grow within an easy reach.

They're productive, because they provide a wide range of microclimates, while they simultaneously

take advantage of precious vertical space. Such microclimates produce very robust plants. Meanwhile, the heat that emanates off of the rocks that hold the spiral together helps to extend the growing season for whatever you happen to plant in the spiral.

Herb spirals also are very beautiful. A tall, bronze fennel presents a gorgeous hue and fascinating texture. A flowering thyme cascades over native rocks. A fragrant rosemary provides afternoon shade to the dark green, serrated edges of parsley growing below.

This narrative could go on and on. But it is important to note that there also is usually plenty of room in an herb spiral for interplanting nonedible colors and textures, especially when they encourage beneficial insects.

The spiral is one of nature's most elegant patterns. It's an archetype of power with a positive purpose. It's an icon that speaks a universal language of organized energy. And, in a garden, it effortlessly invites people to wander through the wonderland that it quickly creates.

To build your own, you'll need to know the area of your spiral.

Typically, a spiral's radius is determined by the arm's reach of the smallest person who plans to use it.

Then, site it. Consider putting your spiral near the kitchen. You may want it in a more prominent place, but keep in mind that part of your spiral's efficiency and productivity will be diminished if you make getting to it inconvenient.

Once you have a site, loosen up the ground below and dump a pile of amended soil on top. The height of the pile (ultimately, your spiral) is up to you and depends at least in part on your rockworking skills. One and a half feet high is sufficient, but go higher if you can.

Finally, build a low, rock retaining wall similar to a sturdy, rock edger that you might run along a planting bed. The challenging part is that this small wall should be built to rise up and around your soil pile in a spiral pattern. (Important: Make sure the low point of your spiral is on the north side of your soil pile to create the widest variety of microclimates).

Now it's time to do your plant-

ing. Herbs that need the most water and the most shade get planted at the bottom. Plant herbs that need the most sun and the least amount of water near the top. Plant herbs that like full sun and more water on the lowest part of the south or southwest side. Herbs that prefer part sun get planted on the east and west sides, keeping in mind that the west side gets hot, afternoon sun, while the east gets cooler, morning light.

For more information on applying natural patterns as well as specifics on herb spirals, check out the "Patterning" chapter in *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual* (Tagari Publications, 1988) by Bill Mollison. Or give me a call. I'd be happy to direct you toward creating such a potential bounty of healthy deliciousness. And, remember: if planted densely and mulched heavily, herb spirals can be weed-free.

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