

GARDEN NEWS

PESTO, PESTO, & MORE PESTO:

Planted now, a bed of tender herbs like basil and cilantro will take off in this warm summer weather, soon producing handfuls of fresh, savory green leaves to be combined with olive oil, pine nuts, and piquant cheeses and tossed with pasta or vegetables for a fresh and easy summer dinner.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is native to warm, tropical climates, so Pacific Northwest basil lovers must relegate themselves to enjoying huge quantities of fresh basil during the few warm months when it's in season here, or grow an entire year's crop during the summer and preserve enough, by drying or making pesto, for the cold months. Dried basil is an essential herb for seasoning a multitude of Italian or Thai dishes, but for providing the nutritional benefit and flavorful green kick of basil all winter, pesto is the way to go. Sweet, green-leaved varieties like 'Genovese,' 'Nufar Genovese,' or 'Puck' are preferred for making pesto, but you could throw a dark-leaved type like 'Petra Dark Red' or 'Red Rubin' in the mix for garnishing green-pesto dishes with a contrasting chiffonade of savory, deep purple-red strips.

Plan on 6 to 10 basil plants per family for occasional summer pesto; plant more if you want to freeze a lot for quick winter meals. Plant basil starts 9 to 12 inches apart in well-drained soil in a warm, protected location that receives at least 6 to 8 hours of sun a day, and keep the soil moist and weeded. Begin pinching off leaves when plants are about 6 inches tall, to encourage the growth of new leaves and prevent flowering (which reduces leaf production and compromises flavor). Harvest the small top leaves first, for more delicate flavor and to keep the plants bushy.



Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*) is growing in popularity as an alternative base for pesto. Like basil, it is a fresh, green tender herb with exceptional nutritional benefits, and it expands the pesto horizon to from the usual basil-friendly recipes into other cuisines, especially Mexican, Southwestern, and Middle Eastern cooking. Try using cilantro pesto in place of (or in addition to) guacamole in quesadillas or on nachos. It can also make a delicious spread (for sandwiches or burgers) or topping (on fish or omelettes).

Cilantro likes to be a little cooler than basil; plants should be placed several inches apart (keeping them close together allows the foliage to shade the roots), preferably in a location where they will receive morning sun and afternoon shade. Wait until plants are about 6 inches tall, then start cutting the leaves, taking the outer ones first as the inner ones continue to mature. Remove the flowerheads as they appear, and you should get 2 or 3 harvests from each plant. Cilantro goes to seed quickly, so for a continuous supply, you'll need to replant every three weeks or so. If you let a few flower and go to seed, the plants will begin to reseed themselves, saving you the work!

Parsley plants, as well as the hardy perennial herbs like sage, oregano, tarragon, or thyme can be transplanted now too, if you want to experiment with less common pesto flavors. Visit our website Library for a basic [pesto recipe](#) as well as a few of our favorite variations.



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