The 10 Commandments for growing herbs in the Keys

BY ALEX PRESS

1. Never consider growing pots of herbs inside your air-conditioned house or on windowsills. A screened patio area is fine if your herbs will receive four hours of sun.

2. When possible provide filtered sun so herbs can avoid the excess stress from heat and humidity. (Morning sun is better.) Placing pea rock or other small stones around the top of container gardens will help keep soil cool and moist.

3. Use a soil mix that will provide nourishment and let the roots “breathe.” Soils that are dense prevent thin roots from absorbing the nutrients and air. Soil for an herb garden should contain compost, manure or worm casings.

4. Space your herb plants to prevent crowding. When transferring herbs from original containers, separate each stem with the taproot intact. Make sure both the receiving pot and soil are moist.

5. Maintain air circulation in the herb garden by removing diseased leaves and leaves on the lower part of the stem. Harvest the healthy leaves from top. Proper circulation prevents black spot and other diseases in humid conditions.

6. Seedlings and plugs have a small root structure and therefore need less water to reach the roots. Once a plant has reached a height or spread of 12 inches or more, the root system is deeper and requires a longer watering episode.

7. Establish proper drainage in garden area by layering the bottom of containers with pea rock or small pieces of broken clay pots. In raised beds and in-ground gardens, mound the soil up and then plant your herbs. Excess water will drain way from stems and roots.

8. Use organic fertilizers available at garden stores in liquid, bead or powder form that contain bird, worm, bat, chicken, cow and/or horse manure. Apply fertilizer after the plant reaches a height of 12 Inches. Or start your own compost pile for future fertilizer needs.

9. Use organic pesticides such as worm casing tea to control white flies and scales. (Insects detest the odor that is not detected by humans.) Spray every two weeks to kill hatchlings. The spray also acts as a fertilizer when excess drips to the soil. Neem tree oil and organic dish soaps can also be applied.

10. Always read the instructions on your soil bags, fertilizers, pesticides and seed packages.

Redland herb farm manager Carolyne Coppolo, from Homestead, recently spoke at a Key West Garden Club meeting about how to grow a successful herb garden in the tropical climate of the Keys. Coppolo has developed 10 “commandments” for container gardens, raised beds or in-ground gardens located in South Florida. They are:

For more information, or to attend a workshop, call 766-897-8047 or e-mail Redland farm@bellsouth.net