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How to Grow Borage Plants: The Complete Guide



Borage, also known as a starflower.

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Planting, Growing, and Harvesting Borage

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: April 18, 2025



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Borage is one of our favorite herbs. It's an edible annual herb with both culinary and medicinal uses. Plus, it's beautiful with blue star-shaped flowers, and it's famous for drawing butterflies, pollinators, and beneficial insects to the garden. Learn how to plant, grow, and care for borage.

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About Borage

Borage, known botanically as *Borago officinalis*, is one of our [top herbs for growing](#). While an annual, it readily self-seeds, appearing yearly like a perennial in your garden. This is not a finicky herb; it will

grow in most gardens as long as the soil is well-draining.

The herb will grow in Zones 3 to 10, blooming from early summer to the first fall frost. It is shrubby with branching stems and grows 1 to 3 feet tall and wide.

Its distinctive and prolific blue star-shaped flowers with black stamens in the center are covered with prickly white hairs. The sturdy, hollow stems and leaves are also covered with white hairs.

Other names for borage include bee bush and bee bread. It is a favorite plant of honeybees (with especially nutritious blue pollen), bumblebees, and small native bees, all of which aid pollination in the vegetable patch. At one time, beekeepers grew it to boost honey production. (Major source of nectar and pollen, it yields 200 pounds of honey per acre and 60-160 pounds of pollen!)

- **Excellent pollinator:** You'll see all sorts of native bees, beneficial insects, and butterflies. It's one of the easiest pollinator-friendly flowers to grow! It

attracts tiny parasitic braconid wasps, predatory nabid bugs, and hoverflies, which eat unwelcome garden pests. It is a host plant for lacewings that lay their eggs on it, and the smell is thought to repel tomato hornworms.

- **Companion planting:** This herb is also a truly wonderful companion plant, especially for tomatoes, cabbage, strawberries, and squash. It helps reduce hornworm and cabbageworm damage.
- **Culinary herb:** Borage is a versatile herb in the kitchen. When crushed, both the stems and the leaves give a cucumber scent and taste, and the flowers are also used as a garnish. Young leaves are a traditional ingredient in a Pimm's Cup cocktail. Later in this article, you can find more culinary ideas.
- **Medicinal uses:** The second part of the botanical name, *officinalis*, indicates that, historically, this plant was used for medicinal purposes. In 1597, the famous herbalist John Gerard even said that the syrup made from the flowers helps depression. This has

been confirmed in modern times as science has proven the active component of borage oil is an essential fatty acid, gamma-linolenic acid (GLA).

Advocates now recommend starflower oil for autoimmune disorders, arthritis, eczema, and premenstrual stress.

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PLANTING

Where to Plant

Borage likes full sun but also does well in light shade. While it loves a loamy site, it will grow quite well in drier sites with loose, well-draining soil. It's not picky about pH.

In the vegetable garden, plant borage in a

sunny spot at opposite edges of a cucumber bed or near tomatoes, strawberries, and squash as a companion plant to keep away pests such as cabbage worms.

Honeybees love borage. If you're planning to use borage in the kitchen, grow one borage plant for cooking and another two to four plants for tea or preserving.

If you've got the space, create a large patch of borage—the seeds can be bought in bulk quite affordably. The pure pollinator pandemonium is well worth the investment, and the flowers often last until well into fall, providing a source of pollen for honeybees when little else is blooming.



Bees love borage! Credit: Tom Meaker

When to Plant Borage

Outdoor planting: Borage is best directly seeded outdoors after the last spring frost when the soil has warmed. Most gardeners' planting dates will range between March and June, depending on where you live. See our [frost calculator by zip code](#). (For hot climate gardeners in zones 9 and 10, try fall planting for winter and spring growth.)

Borage can tolerate light frost, but any more will be damaging. An even better gauge is soil temperature; pick up an inexpensive soil thermometer. Temps should be between 60°F and 70°F (15°C to 21°C) for good germination.

Indoor seeding: Borage's tap root doesn't take well to transplanting, but if you must sow indoors, start 4 to 6 weeks before spring frost dates. This will allow your seedlings to establish strong roots before transplanting.

For culinary harvesting or continued pollinator attraction, succession plant every 3 to 4 weeks throughout spring and into mid-summer. Remember to harden off seedlings before transplanting them into the garden.

How to Plant Borage

To direct seed borage:

- Prepare the seedbed by removing rocks, roots, and weeds.
- Mix aged compost or organic matter about 12 inches down before planting. You can also plant in a container at least 12 inches deep.
- Sow in rows, three or four seeds per foot, $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep, and water well.
- Then, thin seedlings from 18 to 24 inches apart once they are 4 to 6 inches tall. Space rows 18 to 24 inches apart, too.
- For larger areas, borage can be broadcast across a freshly raked surface and

covered with a layer of compost or soil.

To start borage indoors:

- Sow seeds in soil blocks or prepared trays of well-moistened seed starting mix. Use deeper cells as borage develops a tap root.
- Plant the seeds about $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep.
- If using cell trays, sow two seeds per cell. Once they have germinated, thin to one per cell if necessary, snip the extras.
- Keep the seed starting mix slightly moist but not soggy.
- Harden off and plant outside once the last frost has passed.
- Transplant to a 12-inch spacing.



Borage is a phenomenal companion plant in the garden. Credit: weha

GROWING

Borage grows quickly and will not need much attention once past the seedling stage.

- Water regularly until established; no fertilizer is necessary.
- It can be floppy in high winds, so interplant with more stout plants, or consider staking or netting.
- Mulch to keep down weeds.
- Borage will continue flowering for many weeks if the older flowers are trimmed off.
- If the plant starts to look tired, it can be freshened with a haircut in mid-summer. Prune back by half; this will encourage new, tender leaves for late summer harvest.
- Healthy borage plants shed numerous black seeds, so expect to see volunteers for two years after growing. The more flowers you leave to mature, the more that will become seed pods and self-seed.
- Self-sown seedlings are easy to dig and move, or you can pull and com-

post the ones you don't want!

OFA Borage



Types

- ‘Bianca’ is a compact variety with rare white flowers. It’s well suited for growing in containers on the deck or patio.
- Common borage is the standard blue-flowered plant, and it can be used in flower beds or as part of a larger mix in a naturalized bed or meadow. It’s readily available both in packets and in bulk.
- ‘Variegata’ is a less common (and more expensive) variety with splotched leaves. The blue flowers remain at-

tractive to pollinators while the leaves provide a bit of unique coloring.

HARVESTING

Once the flowers have opened, they can be harvested and used for their cucumber flavor as a garnish or addition to baked goods, drinks, and salads.

Alternatively, you can freeze flowers in water using ice cube trays for later flavoring of cool summer drinks.

The leaves are also excellent but should be used fresh as they don't maintain flavor when dried. Older leaves can be a bit fuzzy, so choose young leaves for fresh eating.

Fantastic Free Mulch

Lastly, borage even dies well! It is a big annual plant that grows fast, looks superb, and then conveniently flops over as if preparing for the compost heap. It rots down quickly and is excellent when used for mulching around plants to preserve moisture and add nutrients to the soil.

As a member of the same family as comfrey and green alkanet (Boraginaceae), it has a deep tap root that mines well below those of most other plants, bringing up trace minerals and making it a wonderful addition to the compost heap.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

Borage isn't commonly bothered by pests and does well if the soil is freely drained. Close plant spacing can invite powdery mildew.

Many gardeners report borage works well to control tomato hornworm damage, attracting beneficial predatory insects that prey on hornworms.

Planting this near your strawberries can result in better pollination and fatter berries.

WIT AND WISDOM

- Pliny the Elder (in Roman times) believed borage to have healing properties and be an antidepressant, which has long been thought to give courage and comfort to the heart.
- Borage was Homer's nepenthe, an ingredient in herbal wine that brought forgetfulness. It is widely valued as an herb to make merry and give a sense of well-being.
- Folklore states that if a woman slipped a bit of borage into a promising man's drink, it would give him the courage to propose!
- Young leaves are a traditional ingredient in a Pimm's Cup cocktail.

COOKING NOTES

Borage is a versatile herb in the kitchen. Its fuzzy leaves become pricklier with age, so they must be picked young and chopped finely. The leaves and the stalks can be chopped and cooked like any vegetable.

The leaves and flowers taste like cucumbers. They are added to salads, used in stocks, soups, and stews, or brewed to make a refreshing tea. The edible flowers add color to summer salads, can be candied for cakes, and look lovely floating in summer drinks and “mocktails.”



Borage tea for stress. Take 1-3 tablespoons of leaves, pour boiling water over herbs, and steep for 20 minutes.
Credit: Cattosus

HERBS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Wilcox



Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture.

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Just for the record, the piece has this "Folk law states that if a woman slipped a bit of borage into a promising man's drink," when, of course, it should be "Folklore states that if a woman slipped a bit of borage into a promising man's drink". -- Autocomplete bites again.

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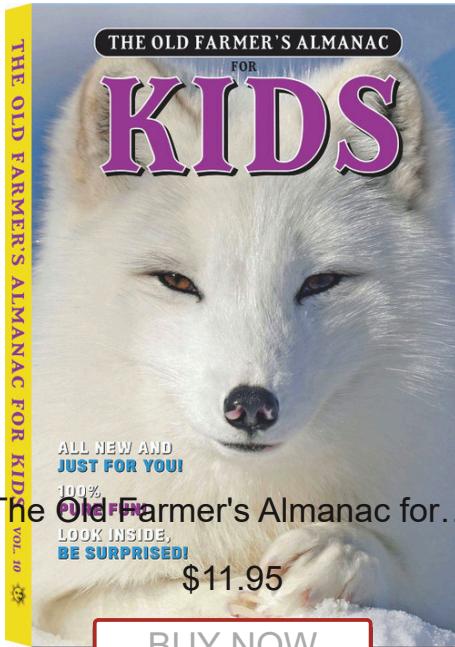
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