I love having herbs in my garden. Friends often comment on how I have mixed the herbs into my garden for effect and for insect control.

Herbs are so versatile in gardens. I grow them amongst my roses (mint and lavender) to deter aphids and leaf eating insects, I plant herbs that revitalize the soil continually so I don’t need to compost areas as frequently as most gardeners do, and I use them for a variety of medicinal and culinary purposes as well.

About 18 months ago, I visited Margaret Roberts Herbal Centre in the Magaliesberg and felt very privileged when she sat down with me and took the time to talk to me personally. She and my Mum are the same age, and I have to confess that the year they were born in yielded a great human vintage. I have many of her books on my shelf, which I regularly consult, one I have had for over 20 years from when I first began gardening and falling in love with herbs. In fact every gardener (in my humble opinion) should have Margaret Roberts A-Z of Herbs, and I have recently acquired another really awesome book called Janes Delicious Garden (by Jane Griffiths) and these 2 books are my constant gardening companions and guides for herbs (and growing vegetables in your garden). So the information I am sharing with you today has been learned and gleaned from these two reference sources, and all credit to them for sharing this info with us. These are 2 books I consider “must haves” and make great gifts. Both give you recipes for insect control and Margaret Roberts' book gives you the medicinal and cosmetic and domestic uses.
Today, I have chosen **5 herbs** to talk about that I feel add value to every garden, home and medicinal chest. They are not the usual herbs that are household names because anyone who cooks or gardens knows those. I want to talk about “little treasures” that are often overlooked for their more publicized companions.

**Nepeta mussinii and N. cataria, Catnip, Catmint**

Grows to:  N. mussinii 15-30 cm, N. cataria varies between 30-90 cm  
Containers:  Suitable for pots (Perennial)  
Likes:  Full Sun – semi shade, well drained loamy fertile soil  
Soil pH:  prefers 6.5-7  
Transplant:  Sept-Dec  
Hardiness:  Hardy  
Water:  Plenty of moisture  
Spacing:  30-35 cm
To quote Margaret Roberts: “Aphids can’t stand it”. This plant is very attractive (if you can keep your cats/neighbours cats out of it). N. mussinii (the smaller variety) is less attractive to cats and has beautiful bluish/mauvish flowers and grey stems and leaves, and looks fabulous as a border. It is also great as a hanging basket plant choice.

You can also plant it around exotic plants like roses to deter the Aphids, sap-sucking and leaf munching insects. Imagine yellow roses with a swath of purply/blue groundcover underneath it. Too stunning! If you plant this in your veggie patch, it will help deter certain beetles.

This herb attracts bees and butterflies, which are fantastic if you are into growing your own vegetables and producing open pollinated seed for the next season. Bees and butterflies provide a free pollinating service, so if you plant this herb between rows of veggies that you are open pollinating, you get the insect repelling qualities as well as the pollinating service.

**Uses:**
• Toys for cats
• Repels rats and insects (spray)
• As a tea, it can be used to combat varicose veins (see Margarets recipe for this one in her book)
• Vitamins – the leaf and flowering top are rich in Vitamin C.
• An infusion can be made to relieve colds and fevers – it induces sleep and perspiration without increasing the body temperature.
• Good for treating restlessness (again an infusion), colic and bedwetting in children.
• Pain reliever – digestion and menstruation.
• Meat – rub on meat to flavour it before cooking.
• Salads – young shoots can be used only in small quantities as they have a strong flavour

How do you keep cats out of it? Grow a patch closer to the house and leave it open for Snookums to go “ga-ga” over. He/she will go there first rather than stroll further afield for its ‘daily fix’!

**Symphytum officianale, Comfrey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grows to:</th>
<th>30-60 cm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Containers:</td>
<td>Suitable for pots</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likes:</td>
<td>Full Sun – semi shade, average soil, needs moisture to thrive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil pH:</td>
<td>prefers 6-7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transplant:</td>
<td>Sept-March</td>
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Hardiness: Roots are hardy, tops die down when frosted.
Water: Plenty of moisture
Spacing: 1 m
Propagation: Take pieces of root, keep root moist till established
Insects: Will attract bees to your garden.
Good for: Swampy ground or badly drained areas.

Now this “little treasure” has really captured my heart. We were given a plant by a friend of my husband’s (Lisa Sutherland) when we were establishing our first veggie garden. This poor plant struggled where we planted it, and when we moved house, I decided to take it with as I valued the leaves composting qualities so greatly that I just could not leave it behind. I planted it at my new house and it rallied, then didn’t, and did, then didn’t. Then my Scottie had 7 puppies who decimated this area, and I performed an emergency rescue on all the plants left unscathed, and put them into pots. Well waddaya know…… just look at this beauty! It just loves living in this pot, so I guess that is where it is going to stay now.

Why comfrey as a special plant. Well let me share how awesome it is with you. It should be grown in every organic veggie garden as it is one of the most amazing natural fertilizers out there. Its leaves have 2-3 times more potassium than kraal manure. It is high in calcium, nitrogen and beneficial minerals. This is a great fertilizer for tomatoes and potatoes. Its very deep root system mines these from the soil, as it reaches further than other vegetables to access them.

How to make Comfrey fertilizer:

Trim leaves and soak in water for 4 weeks. Drain off the liquid, store in a 5 litre plastic water bottle, keep out of the sun (if you have excess). I peronsally use a 50 litre plastic
container when I am growing tomatoes (potatoes take too long for me personally and I need more land before I attempt them again). Warning, they will ferment and smell foul, but tomatoes and potatoes just love it. You can mix in some vermiliquid to the mix when applying and voila! You have a fantastic fertilizer and plant tonic to feed your plants with.

For the gardener who would prefer not to brew the tea, you can cut up the leaves (chop them) and mulch around the plants after leaving them to stand for at least 48 hours after harvesting. I have taken Janet’s advice and tried lining planting holes (after they have withered for 2 days) with them, and the plants have just taken off. The leaves decompose and become a rich fertilizer for the plant.

A word of caution though, this plant self-proliferates, what was one plant is now 4 in the pot. If the flowering stem is used to compost, they can root themselves, so just be aware of this when harvesting the plant for its composting qualities.

**Other uses:**

- The leaf/root can be added to a bath to soften the skin
- Bruises, swellings and sprains – chop 3-4 comfrey leaves finely, soften with hot water and apply to the affected area on a square of lint. Cover with plastic and a bandage to keep in place. Leave on as long as possible. Repeat if needed.
- Comfrey Oil – skin irritations (recipe is in Margarets book).
- Insect bites and stings – rub the juice of the leaves onto the bite/sting to soothe it.
- Insect repellent
- Gout remedy – please refer to Margarets book.
- Margaret recommends it to treat ulcers, tuberculosis, pneumonia, ruptures, burns and bruises. She has a remedy in her book for this.

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**Pelargonium Species, commonly called “scented geraniums”**

| Grows to: | 15 - 120 cm depending on species |
| Containers: | Suitable for pots, good indoor plants |
| Likes: | Full Sun-semi shade, welldrained fertile loamy soil |
| Soil pH: | prefers 5-7.5 |
| Transplant: | Aug-Nov |
| Hardiness: | Tender to semi-hardy |
| Water: | Drought tolerant, water during dry weather – once a week in pots at least. |
| Spacing: | Varies according to species |
| Propagation: | Seedlings and cuttings |
| Insects: | Flowers attract beneficial insects. Repels leaf eating insects |
| Good for: | Hedging plant, potpourri. |
| Note: | Does not tolerate frost, rather put them in pots if you can, or cover if you are expecting frost. |
My favourite is the rose geranium variety (P.graveolens). I have them in pots by the steps to my front door and as I pass by each time, I rub a leaf and breathe in the heady aroma. I have taught my daughter to pick the leaves, bruise them and rub them up and down her arms and legs when there are a lot of mozzies and flies. She now picks them and gives them to guests on arrival or departure, which they love. It gets quite leggy, but I wait for new shoots to appear at the bottom, and then I cut the whole thing back and in no time at all it is looking plush again.

There are several varieties of this lovely herb, peppermint (P. tomentosum), Apple geranium (P. odoratissimum) and Lemon (P. Limonseum). The camphor leaf geranium (P. betulinum) smells like camphor.

What makes this one special? **This is a pure pleasure plant for me.** The rose geranium smells beautiful firstly, but it also can be used for a variety of different things:

- Use on greasy or paint stained hands to remove the dirt effectively
- As an essential oil it is added to face creams to balance the oil production in oily and dry skins. It is also used in aromatherapy massage and benefits PMS, fluid retention, eczema, dermatitis and dry skin.
- An infusion of leaves is effective against dysentery and diarrhea.
- P. graveolens is well known as an anti tension herb, aids sleep and relaxation, soothes digestion. Put some into your pillow case.
- The camphor scented geranium is great for clearing coughs, blocked noses and chestiness. Pour boiling water over bruised leaves and inhale.
- Salads: Flowers can be tossed in salads.
- Baking and food flavouring
- Drinks: Peppermint is delicious in drinks
- Apple geranium for apple dishes, and Lemon geranium for baked puddings and jellies.
- Citronella geranium is a great insect repellant over newly seeded beds. It also repels moths from clothes, and repels cabbage moths.

**Tropaeolum majus, Nasturtium,Kappertjie, “Mother Natures Antibiotic”**
Grows to: 30-60 cm depending on species, climbers much bigger
Containers: Suitable for pots
Likes: Full Sun-semi shade, any kind of soil, even poor soil
Soil pH: prefers 6.5 - 7
Hardiness: Tender
Water: Water during dry weather
Spacing: 30-60cm depending on cover required
Propagation: Seeds – very quick germinating seed – GREAT FOR KIDS
Insects: Flowers attract beneficial insects. Repels potato, cucumber and squash beetles, tomato horn worms and is an aphid trap for crops and roses
   Good for: medicinal, high in Vit C, companion planting, covering unattractive areas.
Note: Does not tolerate frost

This herb is the EASIEST plant to grow from seed. It is the first seed that I taught my daughter to plant as it germinates in a week-10 days. It self-seeds so you keep getting the rewards of this plant for about 5-7 years. The flowers are beautiful and edible, as are the peppery leaves which are high in Vitamin C. They are great in salads. I plant them around the base of my climbing roses which are in pots to lure aphids away from the roses, and it works like a dream. I plant 2 lots of seed, 2 weeks apart, so that when the 1st plants are saturated with aphids, I whip them out and leave the 2nd flush to do the rest.
I also have the climbing variety which add such beautiful colour to my courtyard area. You can eat the green seeds which are peppery like the leaves, again great with salads.

Plant these babies near broccoli as a trap crop, and apple trees for woolly aphids. Great companion plant for mealies, tomatoes and cabbages.

Uses:

- Crush nasturtium seeds and add to insect repelling sprays.
- Seeds can be harvested all year round and stored in vinegar for future use (in sprays)
- Crushed petals can be used to soothe and heal pimples
- Vitamins: Leaves high in Vit C, and effective in treating sore throats. Chew one at first sign of soreness and then one every 2-3 hours.
- This plant is a NATURAL ANTIBIOTIC as well as aiding digestion, nerves and depression, loss of appetite and sleep difficulties.
• An infusion can be made to treat chronic bronchitis and coughs. Steep a ¼ cup of fresh leaves in a cup of boiling water for 5 minutes. Strain and drink a sherry glass full 2-3 times a day.
• Salads: Use the leaves, flowers and green seeds in salads.
• Garnish: Attractive culinary garnish
• Sauces: Adds a strong peppery flavor

**Artemesia Afra, Wormwood/Wilde Ais (indigenous to South Africa)**

Grows to: 1-2 metres
Containers: Suitable for pots, but trim regularly
Likes: Full Sun, well drained loamy soil, and regular trimming
Soil pH: prefers 6.5-7.5
Transplant: Sept-Feb
Hardiness: Very Hardy
Water: once a week (**water wise**)
Spacing: 1-1.5 meters (for a hedge 1 meter apart)

This attractive feathery grey/green shrub is very drought resistant and hardy. It will grow in just about any soil, needs a little attention and trimming every now and then, it actually loves being trimmed! It is easy to propagate, so you can start out with a few fledgling plants which helps with the gardening budget.
Propagation is simple, take 10cm cuttings, trim the excess leaves at the base of the stem, press into a prepared tray and keep moist till established. As they sprout, you can transplant into larger pots, then plant out into your garden when bushy and strong. Plant about a meter apart (this grows quite large), water bi-weekly until established and then only once a week. This is a great choice as a fast temporary hedge, or for around hen houses to protect against lice.

So appreciated is its insect repellent qualities that Nordman Food Supplements offer a formulated anti-malaria tablet. It claims that you cannot build up a resistance to (unlike manufactured ones). I have no idea if they taste as bad as the ones I have taken at school, but it could not be worse and there would be no icky side-effects like I have experienced with the old malaria tablets. As the whole leaf of the artemisia plant is used in production of the capsule and not an extract resistance is highly unlikely. Resistance is mainly a phenomena of man made drugs. Extensive experience in China have not as yet over 2000 years shown the parasites to become resistant, on the contrary as a result of using artemisia malaria has greatly disappeared from China. (J Trop Med Public Health, 1992,23,762-767).

Uses:

- **Insect repellent.** Rub on the skin, but test first on sensitive skins. For babies, you can crush the plant, place it in a bowl close to the cot/bed, rub it on the window sill to deter critters.
- **Ants/Fruit Flies.** Ants are a huge problem these days. If (like me) you choose to garden consciously and not use poisons or toxic chemicals to eliminate these creatures, then grow this plant in abundance, harvest it, dry it and crush it into a fine powder. Sprinkle this around ants nests and fruit trees.
- **Aphids and Mites.** Take ½ a bucket of branches, press them down into the bucket, then add boiling water to the top. Add a cupful of biodegradable washing powder and leave it to stand overnight. Strain into a 5 litre water bottle if you have one and you can keep it and use as a spray.
- **Insect and pest repelling mulch.** Scatter the torn up leaves and sprinkle over a seed bed to fool birds. You can take a sprig of artemesia and stick it into the ground next to a seedling to provide shade and deter cutworms and insects.
- **Use as a mulch** under strawberries to prevent them from being eaten, or sprinkle in the open leaves of cabbages, cauliflower and broccoli to repel leaf eating worms.
- **Fleas on pets.** Use the same formula above without the detergent, and on the final rinse when bathing your pet, pour the concoction over your pet taking care
to rub gently into the ear and sensitive regions of their bodies. Be careful with dogs with skin conditions though, test a patch to ensure they don’t react to it.

- It is a well known traditional medicinal herb, and can be used as:
  - an antiseptic
  - treatment for worms
  - pain reliever
  - fevers
  - constipation
  - coughs, flu and sore throat
  - jaundice
  - appetite restorer
  - cures diarrhoe and dysentery
  - morning sickness
  - as a drink it soothes ear ached and ear infections (see Margaret Roberts A-Z of Herbs for the details to make this)
  - pain reliever for toothache – pack the tooth with a leaf to ease the pain till you get to the dentist.

Happy Herb gardening to one and all!

References:

All credits to go to these 2 amazing reference books, I mixed the info from both into each herb reference.

Margaret Roberts A-Z of Herbs by Margaret Roberts
Janes Delicious Garden by Jane Griffiths