

# Q & A WITH MARILYN HAMPSTEAD

Yael Grauer

## MARILYN HAMPSTEAD IS THE AUTHOR OF *THE BASIL BOOK*, AN AMAZING LABOUR OF LOVE THAT HAS WITHSTOOD THE TEST OF TIME.

First published in 1984, *The Basil Book* contains tons of information on how to “grow prodigious amounts of basil, anytime, anywhere,” and detailed descriptions of 13 different basil species.

Also included are tons of recipes for everything basil: In addition to the pesto and pasta recipes, the book’s got everything from basil horseradish sauce to basil brandy, from icy cinnamon basil fruit compote to basil vinegar, from pepperettes to pastes and much more. Non-food recipes include several for hair rinses, basil facials, bath bags, potpourris... and even basil amulets.

Sprinkled in are fascinating excerpts from old herbals and pharmacopoeias, including Latin translations. Hampstead even slips a fresh basil leaf or two between the pages of the book before mailing it out!

I was lucky enough to speak with Hampstead about her book – and basil, of course.

**Q: How long have you had a penchant for basil?**

A: Since I first tasted pesto in my mid-teens in Detroit. Love at first bite!

**Q: What types of basil did you grow on your farm?**

My staff and I grew not only the varieties of basil in the book but also many more. Our basil was offered both as plants and as produce, which we grew year-round for fine restaurants. I designed one greenhouse specifically for growing fresh-cut basil out of season with special lighting and other environmental factors.

**Q: Were you growing anything but basil?**

Yes, believe it or not. Though I believe we were offering about 18 varieties of

basil for sale, I was always trying different varieties and test-growing those we propagated. We offered over 300 species of herbs here.

**Q: Of the 13 types of basil you describe in the book, which is your favourite?**

*Piccolo verde fino*. To me it has the best flavour. I use it most often, especially for pesto.

**Q: Can you describe a Basil Festival?**

Can you describe pure pleasure and absolute merriment?

Well, first off, the Basil Festival attendance was by reservation only. The basil festivals were focused around a number of events, including the pesto challenge, designed to discover who was the best pesto maker in the land.

And of course, since people came from hundreds of miles away to attend the little bash, we fed them all at the Basil Buffet. We served thirteen to

fifteen different dishes with some variety of basil or another, all prepared on the farm. Every year we would devise different things, since many folks came annually. The only constant was Pesto alla Genovese.

We also had guest speakers covering different types of basil disciplines. These included Jimmy Schmitt from Detroit's London Chop House, garden writers like Alvin McDonald, cookbook library proprietors like Jen Longone, and people who had skills in crafting with herbs in addition to just basil. They would do different seminars or presentations.

We also had a lot of display gardens, including one for children.

**Q: Tell us about the amazing basil maze.**

The basil maze was just a labour of love. We did it for many, many years. I loved doing that maze!

Ours was roughly 70' x 70', using the taller basil. It was my flight of fancy out of nowhere, but ideally if you make the maze with the long basil on the outside with the smaller, shorter ones working in, it gives a more dynamic experience when you go into the maze. Or you could just use one variety. Nowhere is it writ that it's got to be square. I've made them in circles and one year after everything had changed for me a great deal, I also did one as a huge spiral that covered about an acre.

The idea is to use basil as a metaphor, an excuse to connect yourself to the earth and the sky and all the elements. It's very healing.

**Q: Can you describe the edible medallion knot garden? Did people eat their way through?**

Oh yeah. I also used to design gardens for restaurants and private clubs, and some of these things were also employed in the other areas, again just to

get away from the boredom of growing herbs and vegetables in straight rows.

**Q: Anything else you'd like to add?**

I think it's important that people delve into the experience, not only with basil but with the other herbs out there. They add so many dimensions to all parts of life. Today, in many instances, this immersion seems to be lacking. Herbs now are so much more readily available than they were 25 years ago when I wrote the book, and 35 years

ago when I started the farm, that it shouldn't be hard to do that, not only to enhance people's everyday cooking but also other aspects of their lives.

In all the spiritual traditions that I have encountered throughout the world, and since time immemorial, people have used the plants around them to help them connect to all that is holy and all that is important for transcendent experience.

