

OUTSIDE

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Alice Bowe: These hydroponic kits can give you fresh herbs all year round

ALICE BOWE

Here's how to ensure a bounteous crop in the middle of winter



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Herbs grown in little pots indoors suffer as soon as the clocks go back, hit by the triple threat of central heating, cool night-time temperatures and limited daylight. If you want a supply of fresh, fragrant, healthy herbs through the winter, it's time to invest in a heat lamp and hydroponic kit.

Home hydroponic kits, which grow plants without soil, are now widely available. It's easy to see why; they are simple, use less space and create less mess. You can grow plants in them year-round, but they are perhaps most useful for fresh herbs throughout the winter. Many fit on a window sill and some have automated timers for light and watering, so even the most brown-fingered gardener will succeed.

How to choose a system that suits you? Most home kits use one of two methods: either the seedlings are grown in a porous soil-free substrate, such as clay beads, perlite or vermiculite, or they are suspended on top of a reservoir so that the roots can dangle into nutrient-enriched water. You can grow all sorts of plants hydroponically, but herbs and salads tend to be most popular for the home gardener.

You can set up your own system from scratch, but kits allow you to start growing five minutes after you unpack them. Be wary of any product that ties you into an expensive pod habit. These pods are balanced with seeds and nutrients, so all you need to add is water, but they can cost up to £10 for three. Instead, look out for an intelligent, automated system that allows you to plant your own seeds and prioritises low running costs. Here are my three top picks.



2 Akarina 01, £169.99

Another well thought-out piece of hydroponic kit, with integrated timer and dimmer as standard, that comes in a variety of sizes and designs, which all use the same nylon grow-sponges to support the seedlings in a reservoir of water. The largest, the Akarina 01, is a sleek circular affair (32cm wide x 35cm high) that can support 12 seedlings, but my favourite is the compact Akarina 14 (21cm x 28cm), which costs £84.99 and is small enough to act as a bookend, supports five seedlings and looks beautiful as a lamp in its own right.

The only negative to the starkly minimalist design is that the exterior is the perfect foil for algae growth. This won't compromise the plants, but it is worth giving the outside a quick wipe each week when you are topping up. Just one or two seeds in each sponge, add nutrients to the water and enjoy watching your plants grow. Expect to pay about £8 a year for the branded nutrients, or try Baby Bio for herbs.

The full article can be viewed on THE TIMES website at the following link although you may need a reader subscription to view it:

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/alice-bowe-these-hydroponic-kits-can-give-you-fresh-herbs-all-year-round-zxwjl8t56>