

HARVESTING AND PRESERVING HERBS

Herb plants (the 'h' is pronounced in England, generally silent in America) are by definition flowering plants whose aboveground stems do not become woody. These plants are valued for their medicinal and decorative properties, culinary flavors and aromatic scents. All parts of a plant - leaves, flowers, seeds and roots – can be used for different purposes. Plant leaves or foliage are commonly used for flavoring food. Many seeds have highly individual flavors and some stems are important for flavoring. Parts of an herb plant other than the leaves that are used for food flavoring are called 'spices.' Flowers tend to be used for dyes and perfumes. Roots are used as vegetables or as medicinal constituents. Sometimes we use the entire plant.

Harvest time for herbs is decided by the readiness of the plant. Most aromatic herbs are ready just as buds open into full blossom. The plants then contain the most volatile oils, which provide the greatest amount of fragrance and flavor. There are exceptions to this rule. Sage leaves should be picked when buds first appear. Hyssop, lavender and thyme should be picked when in full bloom.

Many herbs are ready to flower and therefore harvest in mid-summer. Throughout the growing season, pick healthy leaves (not those yellow or brown with age) to use whole or chopped in culinary dishes. As the plants grow, cut sprigs from the ends of stems to promote bushier growth. You can use herbs a bit past their prime for fresh use if you compensate by using a bit more than usual.

Generally you can harvest herbs from late spring onward, depending on species. Leaves contain maximum oil just before flowers open. Flowers are at their best when they have barely opened. Seeds are best just as they ripen. Dig roots early to mid-autumn as growth ceases and food storage is at a maximum.

Both annuals and perennials should yield two to three cuts per season. Basil may yield as many as eight cuttings per season. Make the last harvest in late summer to allow new growth to harden off before the first frost. This is especially true for evergreen herbs.

Harvesting small quantities of herbs for immediate use:

- pick center tip of single stemmed herbs such as basil, sweet marjoram and summer savory to stimulate side growth
- nip and use the tops and flower buds of chervil, thyme and mint
- use outer leaves and stalks of parsley and lovage (leave the crown to grow undisturbed)
- gather leaves of purslane, salad burnet and dandelion before they become tough or bitter by twisting or snapping the leaves off at the base of the plant (will encourage new, tender growth).

The best time of day to pick herbs is early on a clear, sunny morning just after the dew has evaporated and before the sun becomes hot enough to volatilize the essential oils that provide the desired flavor. Chemical changes also occur in the plants and the oils, which reduces flavor.

The best time to harvest for preserving is a compromise between maximum production and maximum quality. Aim for the time when flower buds are just beginning to show. This date varies for species and is partly dependent on the planting time, climate and cultural methods used.

Pick herbs that are free of pests and diseases and are not discolored or damaged. If the herbs are dirty, sponge quickly and lightly with cool water and pat dry with paper towels.

Any cuts, bruises or other injuries to herbs will affect their aroma and flavor. When harvesting for storage try to avoid any injury. Gather herbs gently into small bundles, cutting whole stems rather than single leaves or flowers. Use a separate box, basket or tray for each herb. Label to avoid confusion.

Lay cut herbs in single layers and take indoors immediately or cover them with dark cloth or paper. Any delay, crushing or exposure to moist air will diminish their effectiveness in flavoring food. Avoid piling the herbs. Even small piles warm quickly and may begin to ferment or decompose.

Herbs grown for foliage should be frequently sheared or pinched back to assure a continuous supply of tender branch tips free of bristly flower or seed heads. They should not be allowed to set seed. The flavor of the herb deteriorates as plant vigor is directed to flower and seed formation. The leaves and stems then become fibrous. Shear back when they begin to flower. These flower trimmings can be dried for use in potpourris.

When harvesting annual herbs such as basil and borage, do not cut them too close to the ground. Leave enough foliage for continued growing, usually about three inches above the ground. At the end of the season you can harvest the entire plant.

When harvesting perennials cut two-thirds the length of the stalks and the side branches. Cut less than this if the stalks are stiff and woody. You can trim and shape the plant at the same time.

When gathering flower heads such as marigold, rose, flannel mullein, German chamomile, lime or elderflower for drying, pick when the flowers are fully open, but just before they reach maturity. Handle with particular care, as they bruise easily.

When harvesting flowers and seed heads for herbal crafts you can cut them any time they are ready.

When harvesting herb seeds such as anise, caraway, fennel, coriander, lovage and dill, wait until the seed heads are grown or gray but not fully ripened. This prevents loss from shattering and also gives a bright, clean product that contains the largest amount of essential oils. Cut the entire head or seed-bearing stem into a paper bag. An easy method is to slip a paper or plastic bag over the seed head and gather it around the stem before cutting; this prevents seeds scattering and being lost when stem is snapped. After the seeds are thoroughly dried you can winnow the seeds from the chaff.

When harvesting herb seeds for next year's planting, leave the seed heads on the plant to fully ripen.

Most herb roots are dug for drying in the fall, when they are plump and full of stored food for winter. The exception is couch grass, whose narrow rhizomes are best when they are gathering strength in the spring.

PRESERVING HERBS

There are several methods of preserving herbs. They include short-term refrigeration, quick drying, air drying, freezing, and incorporating flavors into wines, oils, vinegars, salts, sugars, butters and cheeses.

REFRIGERATION

Herb foliage lasts longer if it is washed just prior to use rather than immediately following harvest. This method is especially suitable for late fall, just before frosts occur. You can sometimes have fresh herbs for Thanksgiving and Christmas using this method.

For refrigeration:

- harvest as usual
- place in plastic bags or special crisper boxes and refrigerate
- watch for heavy condensation and remove water as it appears

DRYING

Drying is the most common method of preserving herbs. It retains good color and aromas of most herbs. The resulting flavor is robust and good, but not as intense as herbs that are used fresh or frozen.

Herbs commonly used for drying include sweet basil, parsley, thyme, chervil, rosemary, spearmint, marjoram, summer savory, sage, tarragon and lemon balm. Do not try to dry chives. It is easier to grow them in a pot for winter use.

If you must preserve them, try vinegar or freezing. Parsley can be potted, salted, frozen or dried. Burnet is too delicate to dry. Grow it indoors for winter use.

Keep herbs out of direct sunlight. It destroys some of the flavor and will draw oils from the leaves, causing discoloration and bleaching. Proper circulation when drying is necessary to prevent mustiness and rotting. Warmth and air circulation drive water from the herbs. The faster the drying process, the better the resulting flavor quality.

Drying racks can be built like an open-sided chest of drawers on legs with runners for sliding trays and room for a small greenhouse heater underneath. This compact drying cupboard can then be set in a dark, well-ventilated area for very efficient drying.

Herbs are properly dried when the leaves are crackly dry. Leaves should break when pressed between fingers. Keep the leaves intact as much as possible to retain the essential oils and flavor longer. Crumble as you use them.

When drying large leafed herbs or short tips of stems:

- strip the leaves from stalks, discard yellow or imperfect leaves
- spread in single layer on screens or cheesecloth on frame, place in warm, dry location away from direct sunlight
- every few days gently stir or turn the leaves to assure thorough drying
- remove from trays when crispy dry

When drying seeds use the same process as for large leafed herbs and also:

- spread the seeds in a shallow layer
- remove when individual seeds are ready to separate from dried seed capsules
- cure seeds several days in an airy room, move to sunny location for one or two days for extra safety

To dry flowers (marigolds, elderflowers, flannel mullein):

- cut flower heads that are fully open in the early morning after the dew dries
- spread petals or florets on cheesecloth covered screen in single layer
- put in warm, airy location away from direct sun, when thoroughly dry, store as you would leaves
- flower petals should rustle like paper when properly dried.

To dry seeds (fennel, coriander, dill, cumin, caraway, anise, sunflower):

- cut seed heads on hot, dry day when the umbels have just become brown or gray
- gather in large paper bags or lined baskets, holding container under seed heads as you cut
- spread in thin layers on cheesecloth covered trays or cloth covered, heavy cardboard
- you can also use paper bag method
- dry about one to three weeks, stirring and turning occasionally
- rub dried heads with palms outdoors in a slight breeze to blow away some of the chaff
- spread seeds on screen in warm, airy spot and turn gently every day for about one week
- when thoroughly dry, store as you do leaves
- for sunflowers, dry the head whole and separate the seeds when they are quite loose and ready to fall

To dry herb bunches (natural method):

- cut stems with leaves attached, rinse and remove dead and discolored leaves
- tie leafy stems in small bunches, label each variety as it is tied
- hang bunches on cords strung in warm, airy room
- make sure air can circulate freely around bunches
- to prevent dust from settling on herbs, place bunches in paper bags by gathering the top of the bag around the stem ends so leaves hang freely inside
- cut bottom out of bag and make holes in sides for ventilation
- dry one or more weeks until crispy dry
- take down carefully and lay each variety on a separate sheet of paper or separate basket
- strip the leaves (wear cotton gloves to protect your hands)
- some smaller herbs with tiny leaves do not need to be stripped
- for best flavor, keep the leaves whole and crumble them as they are used

To dry roots:

- wipe earth from roots and pull off all fibrous parts, place on drying tray
- use artificial heat to thoroughly dry, may take two or more weeks

- they are completely dry when they snap cleanly between your fingers

Oven method:

- spread herbs in single layer on cookie sheet
- place cookie sheet in warm oven (150°F or lower), turn off heat, leave 10-15 minutes with door slightly ajar
- can take up to 6 hours for woodier herbs
- after a few hours you can easily remove leaves from stems to hasten process

Microwave method:

- put several stems on double layer of paper towels, cover with single layer of toweling
- microwave on full power (100%)
- small leaves (rosemary, thyme) take about 2 minutes; large leaves take about 3 minutes
- experiment with your oven and specific herbs
- resulting color and flavor are excellent using this method.

FREEZING

This method softens the leaf tissues but does not alter the flavor. Some discoloration occurs but it does not affect the taste. Freezing works well for basil, fennel, burnet, lovage, sorrel, chervil, mint, chives, parsley, tarragon, dill leaves and sweet marjoram. Freeze favorite herb combinations in small bags for convenience. Tarragon, chervil, chives and parsley work well for egg and fish dishes. Marjoram, thyme and lovage work well for beef casseroles. Dill, parsley and chives make a good basic mixture for vegetable sauces. Do not try to use frozen herbs for garnish as they become soggy and slimy as they thaw.

Freezing:

- gather herbs in early morning just after dew evaporates
- wash fresh herbs and shake dry, remove leaves from stems
- if desired, chop large-leaved herbs before freezing
- place in freezer bags of appropriate size, seal tightly and label
- to use in cooking, use directly from the freezer, do not thaw first

Alternative freezing method:

- place chopped herbs into ice cube trays filled with water or blend chopped herbs into olive oil (oregano, basil) or softened butter (chives, fennel, parsley) and put into ice cube trays
- freeze, place cubes in properly labeled plastic bags, store in freezer
- add water cubes to soup, stew or casseroles
- thawed olive oil cubes blend well into pasta sauces and butter cubes can be used on vegetables

STORING PRESERVED HERBS

Always use airtight containers when storing dried herbs. Immediately after drying herbs, place them in clear glass jars. If moisture appears, remove the herbs and continue the drying process. Herbs must be completely dry before transferring them to small, opaque containers with tight-fitting lids for permanent storage. Label and date all containers clearly to avoid confusion and store in a fairly dark, cool place.

The shelf life of preserved herbs varies with each method used. If you plan to keep frozen herbs for extended periods it may be a good idea to double bag them. Dried herbs begin to deteriorate within about one year.

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Revised January 2009