

Harvesting and Preserving Herbs

Herbs have been used for centuries in many cultures for many different reasons. They are known for their many culinary uses as well as medicinal, fragrance, and landscape value. Properly harvesting and preserving herbs can provide garden fresh taste and medicinal qualities long after a killing frost has occurred.

HARVEST

- The fragrance and flavor of herbs comes from the essential oils that they produce. Allow herbs to have time to grow on before harvesting to get the best flavors. Plan to harvest the herbs a few times during the season. Keep any flowers pinched regularly. Once a plant has started to flower, it will put all of its energy into producing seed and less essential oil is produced.
- Early in the growing season, harvest one third of the foliage and leave two thirds.
- This can be increased if the plant is overgrown at the time of the first harvest. Continue harvesting during the season, keeping in mind the 1/3 ratio.
- Late in the season, do not harvest more than 20 percent of the foliage of perennial herbs in cold climates. The plants need to be able to survive an unpredictable winter.
- Harvest individual stems (rosemary); use the upper third of the stem, (tip to a leaf node). This will encourage branching and produce a fuller plant.
- To harvest herbs that grow in clumps (chives), cut one third of the clump down to 2" above the ground, every 3 weeks, or cut the whole plant down to 2" above the ground twice during the season.
- When harvesting herbs that grow from a crown (parsley); harvest one third of the outer leaves. After a heavy harvest early in the season, fertilize and water to help them recover. Do not fertilize late in the season.
- Try harvesting herbs later in the day. Improved storage life and increased fragrance have been associated with this timing.



PRESERVING

Drying

- **Air-drying** : Herbs are tied in bunches and hung from the rafters or laid out on screens and placed in a dark location with good air circulation, low humidity, and where warm temperatures are maintained. When drying seed, place the entire ripe, but not yet brown seed head in a paper bag with holes added for air circulation, and hang. The seed will fall into the bottom of the bag as it dries.
- **Microwave drying**: Parsley dries very well in the microwave, retaining much of its taste and color. Lay parsley stems between two white paper towels, avoid overlapping the stems. Microwave on high for 45 seconds. Check for 'crispness'. Continue microwaving on high for 10-second intervals until the parsley crumbles to the touch. The time will vary due to humidity.
- **Refrigerator drying**: This is good method for herbs that lose color when air-dried such as basil or tarragon. Put a few sprigs of herbs on a paper plate and put it in any section of the refrigerator except the salad crisper. The drying process can take 3 to 10 days depending on the humidity and the amount of moisture in the herbs.
- Which ever method that is used to dry herbs, try to keep them in a full leaf form when packing them away. Whole dried leaves, flowers, seeds, and roots tend to hold their flavor and fragrance longer than herbs that have been powdered. Store herbs in airtight containers in a dark place away from heat.
- **Freezing**: The fastest way to preserve herbs is in the freezer. This method does not preserve the appearance very well, but the flavor is superior for use in cooking. Remove any excess moisture, let the leaves wilt, and place the herbs in a zip-loc bag, removing as much air as possible. When ready to use, open the bagged herb leaves and break off a piece. Some herbs can be chopped in a food processor and made into pesto; then stored in ice cube trays.
- Frozen herbs usually do not last over a year. The basic rule for dried herbs is: seeds and roots last 4 years, whole leaves 3 years, and ground leaves 2 years or less.

Vinegar

Herbal vinegars are another way to preserve the flavor of herbs with minimal effort.

