



Harvesting and Preserving Herbs





Harvesting Herbs

Herbs can be harvested whenever they are needed and they taste good. There are no generally applicable rules, but there are a few commonly shared ideas about harvesting herbs.

Time of Day:

Contrary to popular lore, the flavor of an herb plant does not measurably change during the course of a single day.

However, leafy herbs are best harvested in the morning, before they have experienced the daily stresses of heat and of water loss. When herbs (such as mint and lemon balm) are harvested in the late afternoon they often wilt quickly. They can be rehydrated by storing them in an ice bath in the refrigerator for about an hour.

Time of Year:

The flavor profiles for many herbs change profoundly throughout the year. Many herbs are most flavorful just before and during flowering. After flowering the flavor profiles for many herbs (such as mint and oregano) deteriorate.

Sage plants often contain relatively large concentrations of camphor during the spring. These plants taste best in July and August.

In addition to the time of year, the flavor of an herb plant is highly dependent upon the genetics of the plant and upon local conditions. To harvest consistently tasty herb crops, begin with reliable cultivars and taste the plants frequently each year prior to harvesting.

As a practical matter it is often a good idea to harvest herbs (other than sage) for drying in late May or early June. The flavor might not be optimal, but an excellent crop can still be obtained before herb-eating insects make their presence known.

Harvesting Tools:

Many gardeners harvest herbs with bypass pruners. More often sturdy kitchen shears are used. Do not use anvil pruners to harvest herbs because they crush the stems and thus damage the herb plants.

How Much can be Harvested:

For branching perennial herb (such as sage, rosemary, and thyme) up to one-third of the plant can be harvested at any one time. In the month preceding the average first frost date, harvesting should be limited. Cut stems should be given time to heal so that they do not freeze and split during winter.

Herbs that grow as clumps of bulbs (such as chives and garlic chives) are harvested so as to leave only one-half inch of the green plant behind. If the entirety of a clump of plants is not needed, harvest first from the edges of each clump.

Postharvest Care:

Herbs should be processed as soon as possible after harvesting. However, fresh herbs can be stored for up to ten days in a refrigerator at a temperature of between 32 and 41 degrees Fahrenheit in moderately humid but not wet conditions. Herbs should be wrapped in paper towels and placed in a vegetable keeper or an open plastic bag. An exception is basil which deteriorates rapidly at temperatures below 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

Special Considerations:

Basil should be pruned deeply to encourage abundant bushy growth. Flower buds should be removed, because basil plants deteriorate rapidly after flowering. 'African Blue' basil is an exception. It is a sterile hybrid which blooms but does not set seed and does not deteriorate rapidly after flowering. It can be grown for its abundant blooms which are a mecca for bees and butterflies.

French tarragon has a very noticeable anise flavor when fresh. This flavor is due to the presence of the chemical compound estragole. This compound is lost when tarragon is dried. So fresh tarragon and dried tarragon have very different flavors.

Low-growing bushy herbs (such as thyme and winter savory) should be cut back each year at least one month prior to the average first frost date. Otherwise these herbs will develop large woody interiors and comparatively few edible leaves. Always allow some green leaves to remain on each pruned branch.

When **parsley** is harvested, stems at the periphery of the plant should be selected. These stems should be cut near to the base of the plant. If a recipe calls for parsley leaves, the stems need not be wasted. Parsley stems are flavorful additions when making vegetable or chicken stock.



Drying Herbs

Harvesting Herbs for Drying:

Leafy herbs are best harvested in the morning, before they have experienced the daily stresses of heat and of water loss. Many herbs are most flavorful just before the plant flowers. But herbs for drying can be harvested at any time – if they taste good and look good, they are worth preserving.

Air Drying Herbs in Bundles (also known as “Bunch Drying”):

One of the oldest and most widely used techniques for drying herbs is to tie their stems in bundles and to hang the bundles upside down. The herbs must not be damp when they are bundled, and the bundles must be relatively small so as to ensure good air circulation. The tied bundles are suspended in a well-ventilated, dark location until the leaves are completely dry. Depending upon the humidity of the air and the thickness of the herbs, drying will probably take between 3 and 6 weeks.

Bunch drying works best for long-stemmed herbs, such as sage, mint, rosemary, and lavender. It is also useful when drying flowers such as hydrangeas and straw flowers.

To prevent the herbs from becoming dusty and to prevent bits of drying herbs from escaping, herb bundles are often enclosed in brown paper bags. To aid in air circulation, the bags are often perforated with small holes.

The Box Lid Method:

The box lid method is an extremely easy and efficient way to dry herbs. The lid from a box of photocopy paper (18 ½ x 12 x 3 ½ inches) is the perfect size, but any similarly sized cardboard box lid will work. Firstly, a single layer of white paper towels is placed inside the box lid. Next, the herbs are washed in water and shaken to remove excess surface water.

For herbs with relatively large leaves (such as mint and sage) individual leaves are pinched from the plant stems and placed in rows on the paper towel. When one layer is filled, another layer of paper towels is added, and the process is continued. Up to six layers of herbs can be stacked in one box lid. The last layer of herbs is covered with a layer of paper towels. Place a paper label, written in pencil, with the name of the herb and the date collected in each group of herbs.

For herbs with relatively small leaves (such as thyme and tarragon) sections of branches are laid out to dry. The leaves are stripped from the stems after the branches have dried.

Up to six box lids can be stacked vertically with each successive box lid being rotated ninety degrees to ensure adequate ventilation. Depending upon the humidity and the thickness of the herbs, drying takes between 4 and 8 weeks. The box lid method works particularly well with herbs that have relatively thin leaves and with herbs that are rich in anti-microbial compounds. Examples of such herbs include rosemary, marjoram, winter savory, thyme, oregano, mint, tarragon, sage, and basil. The box lid method should not be used for herbs that are very fleshy or for herbs that have very finely divided leaves (such as dill).

Oven Drying:

For those in a hurry, oven drying can be used on herbs that are not fleshy and do not have very finely divided leaves. The herbs are washed and then shaken to remove excess surface water. The herbs are placed onto baking sheets in an oven that is approximately 150 degrees Fahrenheit; however, temperatures anywhere in the range of 100 to 180 degrees will suffice. The herbs are dried until "brittle dry", approximately 15 minutes. When drying, the door to the oven should not be completely closed so that the water vapor from the drying herbs can escape.

Microwave Drying:

Microwave ovens can be used to dry small quantities of a limited variety of herbs. Herbs that can be successfully dried are those that are not fleshy and do not have a high resin content. Herbs that can be dried in a microwave include basil, lovage, parsley, and mint.

The herbs are washed and then shaken to remove excess surface water. Place a small amount of herbs (e.g., about 12 to 15 basil leaves) between two white paper towels. Microwave on HIGH for two to four minutes, stopping every thirty seconds to open the door of the microwave to permit water vapor to escape. Stop as soon as the herbs become brittle and dry. Place herbs on a rack and let cool.

Microwave drying is potentially dangerous, due to the risk of microwave fires. Do not attempt to dry large quantities of resinous herbs such as rosemary, because the microwave oven will fill with flammable and potentially explosive vapors. Do not use paper towels that are made from recycled paper, which often contains metal fragment that have not been removed during the manufacturing process. These metal fragments can create sparks in a microwave oven.

Note: When microwaves are used to dry herbs for craft projects, the drying process is typically accelerated by the presence of silica gel. Do not use silica gel when microwave drying herbs for human consumption.

Food Dehydrators:

Food dehydrators can be used to dry a wide variety of herbs. Typically, the manufacturers will provide very detailed instructions (including estimated drying times) for all of the commonly grown herbs. If a round food dehydrator is selected, it should have a fan that is located at the top of the dehydrator. This configuration provides more even and reliable drying than can be achieved with dehydrators that have fans located at the bottom of the dehydrator. Food dehydrators that are made from opaque materials are preferred to food dehydrators made from clear plastic, because herbs should be dried in the dark.

Drying Herb Seeds:

Herb seeds (such as fennel and dill) can be obtained by drying the seed heads in paper bags, such as those sold in grocery stores as "lunch bags". When using this technique, the seed heads must be relatively dry before they are placed into a paper bag. If necessary dry in the open air for a day or two before placing the seed heads in a paper bag.

Storing and Using Dried Herbs:

Dried herbs are best stored in air tight containers in a location that is cool and dark. When ground herbs (such as rosemary and sage) are needed, grind your own herbs in small quantities shortly before use. The oils that add flavor and aroma to herbs evaporate rapidly after grinding. Dried herbs are usually 3 to 4 times stronger than the fresh herbs. To substitute dried herbs in a recipe that calls for fresh herbs, use 1/4 to 1/3 of the amount listed in the recipe.

Commercially Freeze Dried Herbs:

Commercially freeze dried herbs are now widely available. These products are particularly useful for herbs that otherwise do not dry well (such as dill, parsley, and chives). After opening, commercially freeze dried herbs should be stored in the refrigerator.



Freezing Herbs

In most instances culinary herbs are either fresh or dried. All culinary herbs can also be frozen. Directions for simply freezing herbs, freezing herbs in water and freezing herbs in edible oils are given below.

Since most of us have more space in our storage cabinets than in our freezers, the technique of freezing herbs is usually reserved for festive entertaining and special recipes. Directions for floral ice cubes and herbal butters are also given below.

The Basics of Freezing Herbs:

To simply freeze herbs, wash them and then dry slightly on a paper towel. Strip the leaves from the stem, place leaves in a single layer on parchment or wax paper that is supported by a cookie sheet or shallow tray, and freeze the herbs. Store the frozen herbs in a glass jar, plastic container, or a heavy freezer bag. Remember to label the bags with the name of the herb and the date. Frozen herbs stored in plastic within a frost-free freezer will eventually lose moisture – they are slowly freeze-dried. Such herbs will crumble easily. The taste remains, but the texture may not be suitable for some culinary uses.

Freezing Herbs in Water:

All culinary herbs can be preserved by freezing in water. Add enough chopped herb to nearly fill each section of an ice tray. Barely cover the herbs in cold water, stir briefly, and freeze. For ease of use, select silicon ice trays. Some of the chopped herb may float at the top of the water. After freezing, fill the ice tray completely with cold water, and freeze for a second time. Store the herbal ice cubes in a plastic container or heavy freezer bag. Remember to label with the name of the herb, the date, and the amount of herb in each cube. When the herbs are thawed, they will be limp. They will be fine for cooking but not suitable as a garnish.

Note: Some herb growers use boiling water to fill each section of the ice tray. The theory is that this blanching step improves the quality of the stored herb. In practice, blanching herbs is unnecessary.

Floral Ice Cubes:

Floral ice cubes are a delightful addition to drink glasses and punch bowls. For very clear ice, begin with distilled water that has been boiled and then cooled. Construct the floral ice cubes in layers. Fill an ice tray $\frac{1}{4}$ full, add a flower (sometimes face down and sometimes face up), and freeze. (Alternating the position of the flowers ensures that some of the flowers will always float face up in a glass or punch bowl.) Fill the tray to $\frac{1}{2}$ full, and freeze again. Finally, fill the tray completely, and freeze for a third time. For ease of use, select silicon ice trays that produce relatively large cubes. Large cubes not only provide the necessary space to contain the flower, but also melt slowly – so that the flower can be viewed for an extended period of time.

Floral ice cubes can be made with any small edible flower. Violets, pansies, and nasturtiums are frequently used. Do not use flowers that have been treated with pesticides.

Herbal ice cubes can be made by the same process. Small sprigs of rosemary are particularly attractive. Avoid herbs, such as parsley and basil, which will leave unattractive limp leaves after the ice cubes have melted.

Freezing Herbs in Edible Oils:

All culinary herbs can be preserved by freezing in edible oils. The choice of oil depends upon the recipes for which the herb is intended. Just add enough chopped herb to almost fill each section of an ice tray, fill with oil, mix slightly, and freeze. For ease of use, silicon ice trays are preferred. If the herbs float and are exposed after freezing, add some more oil and refreeze. When frozen, place the cubes in plastic freezer containers or heavy plastic freezer bags. Remember to label with the name of the herb, the date, and the amount of herb in each cube. Herbs can be frozen individually or in combinations. The frozen cubes can be stored for at least six months.

The most popular herbs to be stored in this manner are herbs that are used with oil in frying, such as rosemary, parsley, cilantro, and dill. Some herb growers will freeze exactly one tablespoon of chopped herb in each of many small cubes. Then, adding the desired amount of herb is simple.

Pesto lovers commonly lament the fact that significant quantities of fresh basil are difficult to obtain during the winter and early spring. Fortunately, basil is an herb that retains its flavor when frozen in olive oil; and pesto can be frozen for at least six months. For the best results, make and freeze pesto with all the ingredients except cheese. Add the cheese just before serving.

Herb Butter:

Herb butter is an enjoyable and convenient way to add herbal flavor to bread, rolls, vegetables, and meats. To prepare an herb butter, soften a good-quality unsalted butter and blend with chopped herbs. The appropriate ratio of herbs to butter varies depending upon the potency of each herb. Two tablespoons of chopped herbs for every stick ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup) of butter is often best. Place the softened mixture on plastic wrap, form into a roll, and freeze. When needed, remove the roll of herb butter from the freezer; and slice the desired amount from the end of the roll. Herb butter can be kept in the freezer for six months or more.

Herb butter is best prepared with high-fat European-style butters. The American-made Plugrá® brand is widely used by American chefs. For a really special treat use a good French butter. In addition to great taste, European-style butters offer an additional advantage. Due to their higher fat content and lower water content, European-style butters are easier to slice than American butters.