

Preserving and Using Herbs

If you're like most herb gardeners, you're hooked. You've tried your first herb garden (or gardens), your plants have thrived, and now you're facing more dill than you ever thought one plant could produce. Your thyme is running wild, your mint is mountainous, and your rosemary and rue are outrageous. So what are you going to do with all this stuff? Just ask. We have the answers. Read on.

HARVESTING HERBS

1. Herbs should be cut, ideally, soon after the dew has evaporated on a day which has been preceded by two days of sunshine. (But really, as long as the leaves have just dried off, they'll be fine.)

2. Herbs should be cut when the flower buds are beginning to open, except for mint, which has the most oil in its leaves when in full bloom. (And if you're a kindly soul, leave some blooms, especially on the oregano, thyme, lavender, and marjoram, for the bees and butterflies to enjoy.)

3. Herbs should be collected quickly but gently in an open-weave basket. Stacking them or stuffing them into a plastic bag causes heat to build up, leading to rapid deterioration (and compost!). If you must travel some distance after cutting, transport the herbs with their stems in water.

4. A perennial herb may be cut back 1/3 to 2/3 of its height, and an annual can be cut down to 3-4". Get the harvest safely on drying racks before going out to beautify the just-trimmed plants . . . but do get back out to work on them, because you can often get a second harvest if you shear them properly. At this point, you might want to add some nitrogen-based fertilizer to encourage new leaf growth.

5. Time's a-wastin'! Wash the herbs quickly. Cut away undesirable material and rinse the cuttings with warm water to remove the soil. Never use hot or cold water, and remember to rinse well - sometimes three or four times.

6. When herbs are clean, remove them from

the water at once, place them on a towel, and pat them dry.

DRYING HERBS

Note: Chives and parsley do not dry well at home. Try freezing them instead.

1. A clean, dark, well-ventilated room with an evenly warm temperature ranging from 70° to 90° is ideal for drying herbs. A dark, air-conditioned room is ideal. You can also try an attic room that can be closed at night (although with our climate, attics often bake herbs rather than drying them). Prepare wooden frames covered with muslin, cheesecloth, or wire netting, or use metal window screens covered with fabric.

2. After they are washed, the leaves of basil, celery, dill, lemon balm, lemon verbena, lovage, mint, parsley, sage, and French tarragon are stripped by hand from their stems. Place them in a single layer on each rack. Elevate the racks (perhaps propped between two chairs) so that air can circulate around them. Stacks of books work well, too. Herbs with smaller leaves, like oregano, marjoram, rosemary, and the savories and thymes, should be dried first, then stripped. Strip them with care, please, and with clean, dry fingers.

3. Under normal conditions, herbs dry in 3-4 days, particularly if you turn them daily. In humid weather (sound familiar?), drying



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may take longer, and "crisping" the herbs is necessary as a final step, Simply place them sparsely on a cookie sheet and place in a 125° oven. After just a few minutes, they'll become crisp and ready for storage.

4. Glass jars with screw tops or cork stoppers will keep herbs airtight. Dried herbs are THREE times stronger than fresh ones, so don't overdo it when cooking!! Herbs dried and stored (especially away from light) will maintain their freshness for about a year. Dried leaves stored whole will retain freshness longer than those that are powdered, rubbed, or otherwise broken up.

5. Herbs can also be tied in small bunches and hung from cords (or pot racks or almost any aesthetically pleasing hanger) strung in the drying room or attic. This method takes about a week. As soon as they are dry, they should be stored bunched, stripped, or powdered in tightly covered jars. The flavor will not be as good as with the screen method, but the herbs look simply beautiful hanging in bunches.

DRYING HERB BLOSSOMS

Dried and stored in the same manner as herb leaves, herb blossoms are harvested in most cases at the moment when they have just come into full bloom.

DRYING HERB ROOTS

Herb roots should be harvested in the spring or fall when the plant is inactive, at which time they are the fullest, full of flavor, and will not shrink. They should be scraped and hosed until thoroughly clean, and if they are to be

dried, they should be sliced for size uniformity and laid in the drying room for about six weeks. Turn them over twice weekly, and, if necessary, crisp in the oven exactly as the herb leaves were. A root is considered dry when it snaps cleanly in two by your fingers. The root of sweet flag and lovage can be candied fresh. Roots of angelica, sweet cicely, and fennel are dried for candles, beverages, and flavorings. The most widely used herb roots are the universal favorites: onions, garlic, and shallots. A rope of braided, dried onions or garlic bulbs hanging in the pantry at summer's end is a delight.

FREEZING HERBS

1. Wash the herbs and cut off any discolored parts. Basil, thyme, and dill have better color and flavor if blanched before freezing. To blanch them, bring a pot of water to boiling. With tongs, twirl a few branches at a time in the water. After a few seconds, lift them out, shake out the excess water, and dry them between towels.

2. Put sprigs in plastic bags; seal, label, and date them. If you're only freezing leaves, place them on cookie sheets and freeze separately before placing in plastic bags so they won't stick together.

3. Another freezing method is to mince the herbs, pack them into ice cube trays, then fill the trays with water. Or they can be chopped in a food processor or blender with a little water. As soon as the herb cubes are frozen, put them in labeled plastic bags.

4. Frozen herbs will keep up to six months. If they are used in cooked dishes, there is no need to thaw them before using.



Read on for more ways to use those goodies!

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For the moment, let's ignore the whole issue of using herbs for medicine, aromatherapy, or beauty products. What we're concentrating on is using herbs in the kitchen . . . whether at home or as gifts. And that leaves us primarily with Herbal Oils and Vinegars.

Before we go any further, please read the safety warning to the right (It's really important)



OK, you read it? Now, **here are the rules:**

RAW OR COOKED GARLIC OR HERBS IN OIL: These mixtures **MUST** be refrigerated. Do not store longer than 3 weeks in the refrigerator. (Note: Raw garlic may be safely stored in vinegar at room temperature.)

DRIED GARLIC AND/OR HERBS IN OIL: If the oil is seasoned with dried garlic and/or dried herbs, the mixture may be safely stored at room temperature. (Refrigeration will keep it fresh and flavorful longer, though.)

DRIED TOMATOES IN OIL: Unseasoned dried tomatoes may be safely stored in oil at room temperature. (Again, refrigeration will delay rancidity.)

DRIED TOMATOES SEASONED WITH GARLIC AND/ OR HERBS IN OIL: If raw or cooked garlic or herbs are added to tomatoes **BEFORE** drying, seasoned tomatoes in oil can be safely stored at room temperature (see note above on refrigeration and rancidity).

If raw or cooked garlic or herbs are added **AFTER** drying, dried tomatoes-in-oil mixtures **MUST** be refrigerated, because

those nasty little bacteria can continue to grow. The same **3-WEEKS-THEN-TOSS** rule applies here.

GARLIC FLAVORED OIL: Oil can be flavored by heating finely minced raw garlic in it (at a very low temperature). Remove the garlic by pouring the cooled oil through a fine-meshed sieve lined with several layers of cheesecloth or a food-grade paper towel. If all of the garlic is not removed, the oil **MUST** be stored in the refrigerator –**THREE -WEEKS-THEN-TOSS.**

MUSHROOMS OR CHILIES IN OIL: Mushrooms and chilies in oil must be refrigerated unless they have been pickled with vinegar or lemon juice. Store how long? That's right, 3 **WEEKS.**

PESTO: Pesto is an uncooked seasoning which includes fresh basil, garlic, pine nuts, and oil. **IT MUST BE REFRIGERATED!** Do not store for longer than three weeks in the fridge. Freeze it immediately for long-term storage.

HERB VINEGARS

Herb vinegars delight both the palate and the eye and allow you to preserve the harvest in a

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IMPORTANT SAFETY WARNING!

(Adapted from the Oregon State University Extension Service)

It's important to keep food safety in mind when storing vegetables (such as garlic, mushrooms, and chili peppers) or herbs in oil. These low-acid foods can be a source of *Clostridium botulinum* bacterium which are found in soil, water, and air. Oil's oxygen-free environment is perfect for the growth of the bacteria. **For this reason, herbs and vegetables in oil must be stored correctly in order to prevent botulism food poisoning.**

Commercial garlic-in-oil mixtures are acidified to prevent bacterial growth. These products can be safely stored at room temperature. Unfortunately, acidification of homemade herb or vegetable in oil combinations cannot be recommended until more research is done. Instead, it's essential to store these products in the refrigerator.

When raw or cooked veggies or raw herbs are stored in oil, they must be refrigerated to slow the growth of the *C. botulinum* bacteria. **AFTER THREE WEEKS OF REFRIGERATION, THE LEVELS OF BACTERIA BECOME DANGEROUS AND THESE FOODS PRESENT A SAFETY HAZARD.** Throw them out! And date your containers **BEFORE** putting them in the fridge.

If you remove the raw or cooked veggies or the raw herbs immediately after flavoring the oil, the bacteria will not have a food source. This flavored oil can then be stored safely at room temperature.

When veggies or herbs are dried before storing them in oil, the water that would accommodate bacterial growth is not a factor. Therefore, dried vegetables and herbs can be stored safely in oil at room temperature. Note: Tomatoes are high in acid. Therefore, plain dried tomatoes in oil can safely be stored at room temperature.



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mellow gourmet blend of flavor and herbs. These vinegars lend themselves to many uses in sauces, marinades, salad dressings, stews, and beverages.

Herb Garden Vinegar

- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 4 sprigs fresh rosemary
- 2 large peeled garlic cloves
- 1 quart champagne vinegar

Add the herbs to a container of vinegar. Close tightly. Store in a cool, dark place for 4-6 weeks, shaking every few days. When you are satisfied with the flavor, strain and discard the herbs. Place a fresh sprig or two of the herbs used in the vinegar and store in a decorative bottle.

Quick and Easy Basic Herb Vinegar Salad Dressing

- 1 cup olive oil
 - 1/2 to 1 cup of herb vinegar of your choice
 - 2 tbsp. dried herbs, or the herbs preserved in the vinegar
 - Salt and pepper to taste
- Combine all the ingredients in a glass cruet and shake to mix before using.

Other Herb Blends for Vinegars

- Dill, chives, peppercorns
- Basil, garlic
- Basil, chive
- Garlic, chive
- Sage, caraway (for pork)
- Mint, rosemary (for lamb)
- Basil, savory (for beef)
- Sage, lovage (for poultry)
- Fennel, bay (for fish)



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