

Growing and Drying Herbs

By Bobbi Gustafson

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Choices abound for taste and rejuvenating qualities.

Stocking your cupboard with herbs you've grown and dried yourself is like having your own personal Starbucks—or Walgreen's. Whether you're looking for a unique flavor or seeking something to soothe an illness, they will enrich your life.

If you add the right plants to your landscape, you can start reaping the benefits relatively early in the year. Forsythia, for example, blooms in February and March; in China, it's viewed as good medicine.

As the growing season progresses, your choices multiply almost exponentially.

March/April

Pull on a good pair of gloves, grab a pair of scissors and hunt for stinging nettles. They can be dried for tea or cooked and eaten. Bacopa flowers and foliage can be dried for tea. While you are weeding, pick chickweed for tea and salad.

April/May

Clip sheep sorrel, dandelion and burdock for many health benefits. Gum from the new shoots and small branches of the sitka spruce were used by Native Americans to treat snow blindness and the common cold.

May

During the first week in May, clip the tender green tips of horsetail and dry them for a day in a dehydrator for a pleasant-tasting tea similar to that sold by naturopath doctors for urinary concerns. (Do not eat the plant itself.)

May/June

Look for lemon balm, which should be clipped before it goes to seed. See any shoots from your raspberry patch? Cut them off and dry them for tea.

During the third week in May, peppermint should be ready to cut. Red Clover also should be ready to trim and dry, and oregano too. When you cut the oregano, leave a little of the plant for fresh use. Spicy



photo by Bobbi Gustafson

Stocking your cupboard with herbs you've grown and dried yourself is like having your own personal tea house or pharmacy. Back row, left to right: red clover, hawthorn, rosemary. Front row, left to right: oregano, winter savory, parsley.

oregano is great dried and powdered on burgers.

Look for chives in May, too: Clip some and leave some. When your thyme blooms, leave some untouched so that parasitic wasps and hover flies can feed on the flowers; these critters naturally control bugs in your garden and orchard.

When you trim thyme, rosemary, sage, lavender, heather or any other wood herb plant, trim only where there is foliage. If you trim down into the woody parts where foliage is scarce or nonexistent, it won't grow back.

June

Dry strawberries to flavor teas and add to cereals. Slice them thinly and dry them quickly. Rhubarb stalks also can be diced and dried for tea.

Spearmint should be ready to cut. Crush the leaves and stems, add them to a jar of filtered water and leave in the sun for tea. You can also crush mint; pour pure, cold water over it; put it in the fridge for two days; then strain it for a very refreshing drink. Dry mints for winter use.

July/August

Harvest chamomile, borage, hyssop, curry, fennel, lavender, chives, sage, tarragon, savory, winter savory, calendula flowers, rosemary, parsley, rose petals and camellia sinensis. Dry kale and other greens for extra nutrition in soups.

Pick berries and dry them to make fruit-flavored teas. Strain out the seeds and make fruit leather from the pulp.

August/September

Cut comfrey so it won't go to seed. Dip some leaves in boiling water, cool and freeze in a big ziplock bag to have on hand to wrap a bruise or sprain. Shred the rest and put it in a barrel of rain water to make a good plant food.

Pick rose hips before the second week in September so they won't have bug problems. Rose hips are packed with vitamin C, but you'll need to grind them before you dry them because they are too hard to crack if you dry them whole. Peel the ripe fruit for fruit leather.

In the fall, look for hawthorne berries to dry. A little goes a long way.

Remember, it is very important that you positively identify the plants you intend to use. If you are on medication or pregnant, take the time to carefully research each plant so that the herbs you use will be safe for you and compatible with your medication.



photo by Bobbi Gustafson

For the dedicated herb gardener, there's something good—and good for you—growing from February through fall.

Following a few guidelines will help to ensure success when drying herbs:

- Pick clean plants in late morning and wash them minimally (while making sure they're clean), using pure water.
- Dry overnight in a dehydrator for light plants; heavier plants take longer.
- Make sure the plants are very dry before storing, or mold could develop. Light plants will dry in a brown grocery sack if left in your car for a day or two when it is warm. An oven set on "low" will work, too, but it is more expensive.
- Store herbs in bottles with tight-fitting lids, or in zipper-lock plastic bags. Mark the item and year on your containers. Keep them in a dark cupboard or in a brown grocery bag.

Drying tips

REFERENCES:

- Sitka spruce for snow-blindness: <http://www.pfaf.org/database/plants.php?Picea+sitchensis>
- Author reference for remainder.

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