

HARVESTING HERBS

Herb plants (the 'h' is pronounced in England, generally silent in America) are flowering plants whose above-ground stems do not become woody. The plants commonly referred to as 'herbs' are valued for their medicinal, decorative properties, culinary flavors, and aromatic scents.

When you look at the entire spectrum of herbs available, different parts of individual plants - 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.
- Some stems are important for flavoring.
- Flowers tend to be used for dyes and perfumes.
- Roots are used as vegetables or as medicinal constituents.

Sometimes the entire plant is used. Parts of an herb plant, other than the leaves, that are used for food flavoring are called 'spices.'

Harvest time for herbs is decided by the individual 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.

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 after picking which reduces flavor.

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 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 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 snipped. 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.

When harvesting herb roots: 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.

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).

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

If you are interested in preserving your herbs for later use, please contact the Food Safety/Preservation Information representative at your local extension office.