

Preserving Herbs

If you grow your own herbs, you know how nice it is to just snip and use them for cooking all season long. But if you resort to buying those spendy little bottles in the spice section of the supermarket during the off-season, you might want to consider preserving your own herbs. It is so easy to do, and your own product will probably be of much higher quality than anything you can buy and certainly less expensive.

Air drying herbs is not only the easiest method to preserve herbs, but it is also the best way to retain the highest flavor and quality of the herbs. The two most common methods are bundling and hanging, or drying on a tray. For bundling you'll need some string, rubber bands, paper bags and a place to hang them. For tray drying, a cookie sheet will do with a screen cut to fit on top, leaving a small space between the sheet and the screen for air circulation. If you intend to dry lots of herbs, you may want to invest in a food dehydrator.

The best time to harvest your herbs is just before the flowers first open, when the buds are almost ready to burst. Flavor is at its peak at that time. Gather the herbs in the early morning after the dew has evaporated to minimize wilting. Rinse herbs quickly in cool water and gently shake to remove excess moisture. Discard all bruised or imperfect leaves and stems. If you plan on hanging them to dry, remove only the lower leaves, since they have the least flavor and you'll need room to tie a string to hang them. If you intend to use a tray to dry them, you can separate the leaves from the stems before drying.

Sturdy herbs that don't have a high moisture content, such as sage, thyme, savory, bay, dill, marjoram, oregano, rosemary and parsley are easiest to dry. They can be tied in small bundles and air dried. Hang them in a dry dark place, where there is adequate air circulation. Drying in the dark will preserve the color of the herbs and not deplete them of their precious oils.

Tender-leaf herbs, such as basil, tarragon, lemon balm and mints have a high moisture content and will mold if not dried quickly. Hang these in smaller bunches.

When the leaves are crispy-dry and crumble easily between your fingers, they are ready to be packaged and stored. Separate the bundles and gently strip the leaves from the stems. Whole leaves will keep their flavor longer, but most people crush them and store them in jars for everyday use.

Herbs that are dried for their seeds, such as fennel, dill and coriander can be bundled and placed inside a paper bag to dry. Suspend a small amount of herbs by the stem in a bag and close the top with a rubber band. Tear or punch holes in the side of the bag to allow air circulation. Any seeds that drop will be caught in the bottom of the bag. After the seeds are dried you can easily remove the husks by rubbing the seeds between your hands and blowing away the chaff.

To store your dried herbs, place them in airtight containers made of glass, wood or tins. Do not use plastic. If there is any moisture left in your herbs, plastic has a tendency to promote the growth of mold. Store your herb

containers in a cool, dark, dry place to protect their color and fragrance. Dried herbs can last for years, but their flavor starts to diminish after about a year.

You should try to store enough herbs to last a year, then toss them (or use them up) and replace them with the next year's crop.

Freezing is another easy method for long term storage of herbs. Freezing retains the color and flavor of herbs, as well as most of the nutritive value. The thawed leaves of most herbs will appear limp and should not be used for garnishes, however they are excellent used in cooking. Frozen herbs will last for about a year.

There are several methods for freezing herbs. Try to resist the temptation of just sticking a bunch of herbs in a plastic bag and placing them in the freezer. It may be quick and easy, but when you want to take them out and use them, you'll get an "herb brick." The better way is to spread the leaves on a cookie sheet and put them into the freezer. When frozen solid, place them in airtight containers and return to the freezer. Once they are individually frozen, they will not stick together in one big clump.

Another method is to put about a spoonful of chopped herbs in each section of an ice cube tray. Fill the tray halfway with water. Make sure the leaves are covered with water as best you can. Place the half filled tray in the freezer. Once the cubes are mostly frozen, finish filling the tray with water. Now the leaves should be completely surrounded with water. Place the tray back in the freezer to freeze solid. Once the cubes are frozen, remove them from the tray and store in freezer bags, label and date them, and return them to the freezer. When you are ready to use them, just toss the whole cube into your favorite soups or stews. Another option is to freeze them in broth instead of water.

Herbs may also be combined and frozen into little herb bouquets. Choose 3 or 4 herbs that you like to use together. Place them on a 4-inch square of cheesecloth and tie tightly with kitchen twine. Put herb bouquets in a freezer bag and use them straight from the freezer for cooking.

References

The Complete Book of Herbs, Lesley Bremness, Viking Studio Books, New York, New York, 1988.

Herb Gardening for Washington and Oregon, Marianne Binetti and Laura Peters, Lone Pine Publishing, Auburn, WA, 2008.

[Harvesting and Drying Herbs](#), the epicentre.