

Harvesting and Preserving Herbs by E. Slash

Herbs should be harvested when the oils responsible for flavor and aroma are at their peak. Proper timing depends on the plant part you are harvesting and the intended use. As a general rule, herbs grown for their foliage should be harvested before they flower. While chives are quite attractive in bloom, flowering can cause the foliage to develop an off-flavor. Harvest herbs grown for seed as the seed pods change color from green to brown to gray, but before they open. Collect herb flowers, such as borage and chamomile, just before full flower. Harvest herb roots, such as chicory or goldenseal, in the fall after the foliage fades. More general guidelines include:

- + Begin to harvest the herb when the plant has enough foliage to sustain growth.
- + Harvest early in the morning, after the dew had dried but before the heat of the day.
- + Harvest herbs before flowering. After flowering, leaf production declines. Remove flowers from herbs to keep the growing stage longer.
- + Herb flowers have the most intense oil concentration and flavor when harvested after the buds appear but before they open.
- + Annual herbs can be harvested until frost.
- + Perennial herbs can be clipped until late August in most areas. Stop harvesting about one month before the first hard frost. Late pruning can do a lot of damage.
- + Harvest lavender or tarragon flowers in early summer and then shear the plants to half their height to encourage a second flowering period in the fall, though this could vary depending on the weather conditions during the growing season.
- + Avoid crushing dried leaves until ready to use to preserve flavor.

Herbs acquire their fragrance and flavor from oils that evaporate into the air when the leaves are crushed. Ideally, you should use fresh herbs for cooking, but it is possible to retain some quality for later use. There are several methods to preserving herbs. Begin by cleaning the herbs as gently as possible. Remove the leaves from the stems. Rinsing an/or soaking in cold water to remove grit is sometimes necessary. A vegetable spinner can “spin out” a lot of the moisture, though a colander or sieve work well, too. Place the leaves on absorbent cloth to dry as quickly as possible.

Next, choose any of the following methods of preserving. Trying alternatives is a good way to find what works best for you and your needs.

Freezing: Freezing is one of the easiest and efficient methods of preserving herbs. Once the herbs are clean and dry you can space them on a baking sheet and place it in the freezer until frozen. Keep the frozen herbs in a plastic freezer bag and only remove what you will be using at the time since herbs cannot be re-frozen. Frozen herbs can't be used as garnish but are excellent for baking.

Another method that works well is chopping the fresh herbs and placing large pinches

into ice cube trays. Fill the trays with water and freeze. The herb cubes can be put into freezer bags and kept for 6 months.

One note: I would highly recommend placing baking soda in the freezer while freezing herbs. They become quite pungent and other food is quick to pick up basil and oregano as well as sage flavors.

Drying: When drying herbs, the most important thing to remember is to make sure the herbs are completely dry. Unless you are Jonas Salk, you probably won't like the finished product when it molds. Herbs are completely dry when they are brittle and crumble easily.

There are several methods of drying herbs but I find the easiest is a food dehydrator. I just place clean and dry herbs on the drying racks, stack them and turn it on. Most herbs will be dry in 8 to 12 hours. Chopping the herbs prior to dehydrating makes it quicker and is energy saving.

One note: Try to dry one herb type at a time. Parsley will taste like sage or chives when placed in the dehydrator together. Try to keep it to one flavor or type.

Another method for drying herbs is in the oven. Pre-heat the oven to a low temperature, (100*) and turn off the oven. Place the clean and dry herbs on a baking sheet and place in the oven with the door ajar. Check on the herbs periodically and stir them occasionally. Re-heat the oven if necessary. I have never tried this method but I have friends that have. It takes a bit longer but the results are as good as using a dehydrator.

Microwave drying is effective as a quick fix for drying. I have a microwave press that was purchased it works great! An alternative to a press is to place the herbs in a single layer between 2 pieces of absorbent cloth or paper towel. Place on a plate and set the timer to 30 seconds. More time can be added in 15 second intervals. Note that the herbs won't be completely dry but will look dry. Do not attempt to over-dry them. When 'microwave' dry, place on a clean surface and allow to finish drying.

The most popular method is air drying. Clean and dry the stems of your herbs. Remove any damaged foliage and tie the bunches with a rubber band or string. Hang them out of direct sun in a well-ventilated place. Keep in mind that frost and dew can discolor and severely reduce the quality of the dried herbs. Some herbs, like basil, tarragon and mints may mold if not dried quickly. Allow for good air circulation and wait. This could take up to one month. When the stems are completely dry, remove the leaves and keep in an air tight container or a re-sealable bag. If drying flowers, keep the flowers in a container that won't crush or damage them.

You can dry herbs on a screen for a quicker time saver. Remove the foliage from the stems and dry on screens or drying racks in a well ventilated place. Turn the leaves often to ensure even drying.

For drying herbs with seeds, tie clean and dry stems together and suspend inside a paper bag with holes punched in the sides or make a bag with fabric such as tulle. Hang in a dark area with good circulation. Collect the seeds when they are dry and store in an air-tight and light-proof container. I find dark film canisters work well for this and are free.

I have never tried drying roots, stems or barks, but rumor has it that it's much easier to chop, slice or shred them prior to drying. Drying them whole protects their viability but becomes beastly and difficult to do after drying.

For more information on drying and preserving herbs, ***The Pleasure of Herbs*** by Phyllis Shaudys is an excellent book. A great on-line source is www.healthyherbs.about.com/ They have a link, A to Z Encyclopedia of Herbs and an awesome resource. I would also like to thank my friends at the North Carolina Extension Service who helped me compile this but are in no way, responsible for the content in this article. E. Slash