

Preserving Herbs from the Harvest



Herbs not only tickle our senses in the garden, but can be harvested for culinary purposes as well. We see and smell them in the garden and they trigger our hunger cravings. So how do we preserve herbs from the harvest?

DRYING HERBS

Air dry low-moisture herbs like marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, thyme, and dill. Tie stems and wrap bundles in muslin, mesh produce bag or paper bag with holes. Hang them from drying racks in a dry and dark place.

Use a dehydrator for herbs like basil, chives, lemon balm, tarragon and mint as they may contain more moisture. For best results, pre-heat dehydrator to a temperature range of 95 – 115 degrees F. This may take 2 – 4 hours. Better quality dehydrators also have thermostats, temperature controls and double-walled construction for more efficient energy usage.

If a dehydrator is not available, dry higher moisture containing herbs like basil, chives, lemon balm, tarragon and mint in the oven. Set the oven to the lowest temperature possible to prevent burning. Pre-heat for best results. Dry in oven for 2 – 4 hours.

FREEZING HERBS

Chop or de-stem leaves whole from herbs like oregano, marjoram, sage and thyme. Spread on a cookie sheet and freeze then place in foil packets and tuck back into the freezer in labeled bags.

Freeze tender herbs like basil, parsley, tarragon, lemon balm, mint and dill in water or oil. Chop herbs first and add to ice cube tray that is half full of water or add herbs to ice cube tray and fill each cube with oil. When frozen, pop out and add to freezer bag. Use within 2 – 3 months. Try different oils for different flavor profiles, olive, coconut, avocado, walnut or other.

Freeze your herb of choice in butter by chopping leaves first, then add to butter, mix well and wrap and freeze in foil packets. Store in plastic freezer bags and label. Use within a year.

INFUSING HERBS IN OIL

Rosemary, sage, thyme, oregano and marjoram can be infused with oil two different ways; on the windowsill or by heating. When infusing herbs on the windowsill, add DRIED whole or chopped herbs to oil and make sure herbs are fully submerged. Cap jar and shake. Place the jar on the windowsill and shake daily for 2-3 weeks. Strain the herbs and store oil in cool, dark place. Use within 6 months.



For the heating method, add DRIED whole or chopped herbs to the oil and make sure herbs are full submerged in a jar. Heat oil over low heat (100-140 F) for 1-5 hours until the oil takes on the color and smell of the herbs. Let cool and then strain the herbs and store the infused oil in a cool, dark place. Use within 6 months.

HERB SALTS AND SUGARS

Rosemary, sage, thyme, oregano, marjoram and lavender can be added to salt or sugar for culinary use. Add whole or chopped herbs with salt or sugar to a food processor and pulse a few times to combine. Use within 6 months.

GROWING HERBS AND WHEN TO HARVEST

Rosemary, oregano, sage, thyme, marjoram, basil, parley, tarragon, lemon balm, dill, chives, mint, shiso, cilantro, lavender, summer and winter savory need 6 or more hours of full sunlight. Some herbs will tolerate partial sun requiring only three to six hours of sunlight. These include mint, lemon balm, parsley, chives, and sorrel.

SOIL AND WATER NEEDS

Some herbs require well-draining sandy soil and are drought tolerant once established - rosemary, oregano, sage, and thyme. Others require well-draining soil with frequent watering like basil, dill, and tarragon. Some herbs can grow in a variety of soils including well-draining soil and a moist soil rich in organic matter like chives, lemon balm, and mint.

LIFE CYCLE

Herbs can be annuals, biennials, or perennials. An annual plant is one that completes its lifecycle in one season. They germinate from seed, grow to a mature plant, flower and produce seed, and die in one year or less. Summer annual herbs include basil, dill, shiso, and cilantro. Planting times vary – plant basil only when soil is warm – early June.

A biennial plant completes its lifecycle in two years. During the first year, these plants will grow roots, stems and leaves; in the second year they will flower and produce seeds. Parsley is an example of a biennial herb.

Perennial plants take two or more years to complete their lifecycle, can live for many years producing flower and seeds many times throughout their life. They also can spread through other means – they form under or above ground running stems or develop offshoots at their base. Perennial herbs include marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, thyme, chives, lemon balm, tarragon, and mint.

SIZE AND POT NEEDS

Herbs can be grown in containers or in the ground. Choose smaller varieties for pots. In the garden, some herbs can serve as groundcovers like thyme and oregano or small to large woody shrubs like lavender, sage and lemon balm. Rosemary can get quite large, exceeding 5 feet in height and 3 feet in spread! Prune rosemary annually to control size. Divide lemon balm and mint annually – keep mint in a container to prevent from spreading by underground stem.

HARVESTING HERBS

Leaves from annual herbs can be harvested multiple times during their lifecycle. Up to 50% of the plant can be harvested at one time. For better flavor, harvest the leaves before the plant flowers. Remember to leave some flowers to feed beneficial insects.

Leaves from perennial plants can be harvested many times throughout the plant's life. Up to 30% of the plant can be harvested at one time. Leaf flavor may change as the plant starts to flower. Harvest while flowers are tight in the bud for best essential oil content.

RESOURCES

Preus, Mary; 02-29-2000; *The Northwest Lover's Handbook: A Guide to Growing Herbs and Cooking, Crafts, and Home Remedies.*

Swanson's Nursery; Herb Care Sheet; October 26, 2020;:
<https://www.swansonnursery.com/herb-care-sheet>.

Lorene Edwards Forkner; May 23, 2020; *Garden Designer Sue Goetz shares tips for planting, harvesting and enjoying herbs for the Northwest*, Seattle Times; October 26, 2020; <https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/garden-designer-sue-goetz-shares-tips-for-planting-harvesting-and-enjoying-herbs-for-the-northwest/>



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