

Five Ways to Preserve Fresh Herbs

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Using fresh herbs in cooking adds layers of fragrance and flavor, and can make even simple recipes more interesting and enjoyable. For most herbs, the leaves are the part most commonly used. Cutting herb plants back mid- season is a tactic with multiple benefits- provides a harvest, contributes to strong, well-shaped plants, and delays flowering (flowering negatively changes the flavor of many herbs).

Depending on leaf shape and how the herbs will be used, there are a variety of ways to preserve the herbs for best flavor and quality. Drying changes and concentrates the flavor of most herbs. The exception to this are the Apiaceae family: dill, cilantro, and parsley. These all have a milder flavor when dried. Typically, dried herbs are used in less quantity than fresh due to the concentration of flavor.

Among some of the easiest plants to grow and use (exceptions are lavender and tarragon), herbs are also easy to store for future use. Cut early in the morning or in the evening for best flavor. Following are a few ideas for preserving the herb garden harvest.

Refrigeration. When cut fresh, herbs such as parsley, cilantro, mint, oregano, and sage can last up to several weeks in the refrigerator. Place the herbs upright in a glass container of water, stripping any leaves off the stem if they will be below the water line. Cramping too many stems into the jar will cause premature decay- the leaves and stems need a little room to breathe. A little lemon juice or a vitamin C tablet added to the water keep it slightly acidic, deterring bacterial growth and increasing longevity. Alternatively, a mesh produce bag with a moistened paper towel also works. Keeping herbs enclosed in a plastic bag like those found at the grocery traps moisture in and causes decay.

Air Drying. Simple and easy, there are still a few considerations that will improve the odds when using this technique. The low humidity of our Klamath climate makes air drying is a great option for many kinds of herbs. Avoid drying in a sunlit place. When bundling herbs in bands to dry, remove leaves that will be caught inside or near the band. Bind stems especially tight- as they dry, they shrink and will fall right out of the binding if it's not tight enough. Conversely, the parts of the bundle not near the binding should have some air flow. Keep in mind that most leaves will change color as they dry. After drying completely, strip the leaves from the stems. Store dried herbs in airtight containers away from sunlight.

Herbed Ice cubes. For those that make lots of soups and sauces, this technique will come in handy. Best for herbs like chives, thyme, oregano, savory, and parsley, chop fresh leaves into small pieces and put into ice cube trays. Add water, freeze, and store the cubes in another container after they are frozen. Later, when needed, the cubes can be dropped into the soup or sauce- instant burst of fresh garden flavor. Alternatively, use mint and lemon balm leaves in the same way to be added to tea.

Dehydration. Some herbs may have short stems (chamomile), fleshy leaves (sage), or hard-to bundle leaves (chives) that make bundling and air drying less than ideal. A dehydrator is a handy way to address preservation of these herbs. Basil tends to discolor when air dried- dehydration can result in a more attractive product. Most herbs will dry very quickly using this method. Ideally, collect the products before they are so dry they shatter to the touch- this level of dryness is associated with reduced flavor.

Vinegars. Herbed vinegars last for months, are easy to prepare, and are the basis of numerous salad dressing and meat seasoning preparations. The acidity of vinegar is preservative, so some level of safe

experimentation is possible. This does not hold true with herbed oils, which don't have the protection of vinegar's acidity. Colorado State University provides details on how to safely prepare herbed oils and vinegars: <https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/nutrition-food-safety-health/flavored-vinegars-and-oils-9-340/>.

Whether an experienced gardener with tons of space, or new gardener with a patio, herb gardening provides opportunities for culinary experimentation. Herbs can even make the mundane special. A favorite "quick upgrade" used by the author uses prepackaged crescent rolls. Brush a little melted butter onto the sheet of rolls before separating. Scatter thyme leaves and chopped chives, then separate, roll, and prepare the rolls as directed on the package. The result is suggestive of much more effort than was actually expended.