



# 10 Tips for cooking and preserving herbs

## **Reasons to love fresh herbs**

Whether you grow them or buy them at the grocery store, adding fresh herbs transforms ordinary meals into extraordinary meals. “Besides helping flavor foods when cutting back on salt, fat and sugar, herbs may offer additional benefits of their own. Researchers are finding many culinary herbs have antioxidants that may help protect against such diseases as cancer and heart disease”. (*Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator - Nutrition, University of Nebraska—Lincoln Extension*)

**Tip 1:** Pick fresh herbs in the morning after the dew has dried. You may harvest up to half of a plant at one time. Harvesting and regular pruning helps your herb plants remain robust and productive. For herbs that flower, it is best to remove flowers or harvest before flowers open to ensure the best flavor profile.

After rinsing, place herbs loosely in a plastic bag and store in the refrigerator. Herbs stay fresh for 2 to 3 days. Alternatively, place plants or sprigs in a jar or cup with about 1 inch of water and cover with a plastic bag. Store in refrigerator. If the water is changed daily, herbs can last up to two weeks using this method.

**Tip 2:** How to remove herb leaves from stems. For herbs on woody stems, grab the top of the stem with one hand and with the other hand move down the stem opposite the direction of growth to remove leaves. For soft stem herbs, like basil and cilantro, leaves can be removed with scissors or by pulling against the stem in the direction of growth.

**Tip 3:** Dried herbs maintain their flavor for 6 months to 1 year. If you cannot smell the herb when you open the container, it is less likely to add flavor to your food. Replace dried herbs often and choose fresh herbs whenever possible.

**Tip 4:** Herbs should be completely dry before cutting, chopping or tearing. To remove water on herb leaves, pat dry with a paper towel or use a salad spinner. Use a very sharp knife or scissors when cutting herbs. For mint, basil, and sage, remove leaves from stems, then gently tear into pieces to avoid bruising. Or, stack the leaves one on top of another, roll them into a tight bundle and slice crosswise with a sharp knife. For delicate herbs like parsley, dill, fennel and cilantro, it is okay to leave some of the thin stem because the stem has the same flavor—just be sure to remove thicker stems. Firm textured herbs can be minced in a grinder or food processor.

**Tip 5:** When a recipe calls for dried herbs, the general rule of thumb is to add three times the amount of fresh herbs to get the correct flavor enhancement. However, some herbs such as rosemary and bay leaves do not lose flavor when dried and should not be increased. Your taste is the best guide to the quantity of herbs to add.





**Tip 6:** Add firm textured herbs such as rosemary, thyme, lemongrass and sage about mid-point in preparing long-cooking foods like soups and stews. Add soft-leaf herbs, such as basil, dill, parsley, cilantro or mint at the end of cooking. If you intend to remove herbs before serving, which is often done with tough textured herbs like bay leaves and rosemary, they are easier to remove if you placed them in a sachet or cheese cloth wrap.

**Tip 7:** You can create a flavorful water infusion by combining 1 cup fruit with 3 tablespoons fresh herbs, water and honey. Place in a pitcher, jar, or glass and refrigerator for an hour or longer. Use a straw to sip the infused water.

**Tip 8:** A herb sprig provides a lovely garnish for a serving plate of meat or fish.

**Tip 9:** Although a popular herb in Mexican and Asian cooking, not everyone likes cilantro and you may want to check with guests if your recipe calls for it. Recent research suggests that “cilantro dislike may stem from genetic variants in olfactory receptors that contributes to the detection of a soapy smell from cilantro in European populations.” (Nicholas Eriksson, Stanford University, *Flavour* 2012, 1:22.

**Tip 10:** To make herb butter: Mix softened, room temperature butter with chopped herb leaves in a food processor or blender. Use 2 to 4 tbsps. of finely-chopped herbs for 8 oz. of butter.

- Roll the butter into a log and cover with plastic wrap.
- Refrigerate for several hours or overnight to allow flavors to merge.
- Freeze or store in the refrigerator for up to four days. (University of Alabama Extension Service, Farmers' Bulletin No. 1977 U.S. Department of Agriculture). Herbs often used to make butter include: basil, chives, dill, oregano, parsley, rosemary, tarragon, thyme.
- For herb butters add small amounts of citrus rind, ginger or garlic for extra flavor.

