



Using Culinary Herbs in Recipes

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You've established your herb garden and have reaped the benefits with a bountiful harvest! (Refer to [Growing Culinary Herbs](#)) Now you are ready to learn how to preserve and store your culinary herbs. Helpful information on preparing to use your herbs in cooking is also included.

DRYING

Hang herbs in loosely tied bundles in a well-ventilated room; a shady porch is a good option. You can also spread the branches on a screen or lay the herb leaves on flat trays. Another method is to place the herbs in paper bags, then shake the bags several times a day. One suggestion is to dry herbs in a flat basket that is placed on top of the refrigerator. Good air circulation during the drying process helps prevent the growth of mold.

For best flavor retention, do not dry herbs in a conventional or microwave oven because essential oils volatilize at 85°F to 110°F.

Dry small-leaved herbs such as rosemary, thyme, oregano, and marjoram, on their stems. Strip the large leaves of basil, mint, sage, and lemon balm from their stems to speed drying.

The herbs are dried when they are the texture of corn flakes or potato chips.

STORAGE

Dried Herbs: After the herbs are dried, they will keep flavor better if they are kept whole rather than crumbled. Seal the dried herbs in air tight containers and store in a dark, cool, dry location. Don't forget to label the jars! If stored properly, herbs have a shelf life of about one year before they lose strength or flavor.

Fresh Herbs: To store fresh herbs, tie a small bunch of herbs together tightly. Wrap in wet paper towels and tuck into a plastic bag, leaving the end open for air. The herbs will keep in the refrigerator for a few days. Or you can put a bunch of herbs in a small vase filled with water and keep them in the fresh air, but out of the sun. To extend the freshness of herbs, snip off the ends of the stems on the diagonal. The flavor of herbs may diminish the longer they're stored.

FREEZING HERBS

Several books and articles on herbs recommend freezing as an easy way to preserve herbs. Recommendations vary on the best way to freeze herbs, how long frozen herbs will maintain a satisfactory flavor and which herbs will freeze well. Be aware that when herbs are frozen, they become limp, lose their color and are best used in cooked foods. The most conservative guidelines for how long herbs will maintain their quality frozen range from two to six months. Here are three possible ways to freeze herbs:

1. The easiest method is to wash, drain and pat dry with paper towels. Wrap a few sprigs or leaves in freezer wrap and place in a freezer bag. Seal and freeze. These can be chopped and used in cooked dishes. These usually are not suitable for garnish, as the frozen product becomes limp when it thaws.
2. Another method recommends washing herbs, cutting them into tiny pieces and then filling the sections of an ice cube tray about half full with herbs. Cover herbs with cold water and freeze until solid. Transfer frozen cubes to a freezer bag and squish out as much air as possible. Drop them into soups, stews and sauces as needed. Be aware herbs may stain plastic ice cube trays.
3. To save time chopping herbs into tiny pieces, you might try making a “slurry”. Simply puree your washed herbs in a blender with a small amount of water. Pour into ice cube trays and freeze until solid. Transfer to a freezer bag and add to foods, as desired.

Regardless of how you freeze herbs, label them as to type (they tend to look the same frozen) and the date frozen. If you freeze quite a few herbs, it may be easier to find them in your freezer if you store the individual packages together in one large container.

Which method works best? Experiment for yourself with small amounts of herbs at the beginning of the season and sample your results a month or so later. Determine your personal preference before committing a lot of time (and freezer space!) to frozen herbs.

PREPARE HERBS FOR COOKING

It is such a joy to grow herbs – but it is also important to use them in cooking for healthy and flavorful dishes. The distinction of culinary herbs is that they are the various plants that can be used to enhance recipes. The leaves of most herbs are the part of the plant used most often in cooking. However, the seeds or roots of some herbs may also be used. Mild or savory herbs impart a delicate flavor to foods while the stronger or pungent herbs add zest to foods. There are also a number of additional herbs that are used for medicinal or ornamental purposes.

Culinary herbs are very attractive and include many varieties, so their ornamental value in your garden is important. These herbs are used in small quantities in cooking, so usually only a few plants are necessary to provide sufficient fresh and dried herbs for the entire season.

Wash the herbs when you are ready to use them. Rinse under cool running water and shake off moisture; or spin dry in a salad spinner. Pat any remaining moisture dry with clean paper towels. For most recipes, mince your herbs into tiny pieces by snipping with kitchen scissors. Be careful if you use a food processor – it is easy to turn the herbs into a paste. Some recipes may direct you to cut large leaves, such as basil, chiffonade-style, or into thin strips. An easy way to do this is to stack several leaves (about 3 to 5), roll into a tight roll, and then cut into thin (1/16 to 1/8 inch) strips with a sharp knife.

While some recipes call for a sprig or sprigs of herbs, normally the part of the herb you harvest will be the leaves. For herbs with sturdier stems, such as marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage and thyme, you can strip off the leaves by running your fingers down the stem from top to bottom. With small-leaved plants such as thyme, you can use both leaves and stems for cooking early in the season. Later in the season, as the stems become tougher, use just the leaves. For herbs with tender stems, such as parsley and cilantro, it's OK if you snip some of the stem in with the leaves when you're cutting these herbs.

Unlike dried herbs, fresh herbs are added toward the end of cooking to preserve their flavor. Fresh herbs can be added to refrigerated cold dishes several hours before serving to help the flavors blend. Add the more delicate herbs -- basil, chives, cilantro, dill leaves, parsley, marjoram and mint -- a minute or two before the end of cooking or sprinkle them on the food before it's served. The less delicate herbs, such as dill seeds, oregano, rosemary, tarragon and thyme, can be added about the last 20 minutes of cooking. Obviously, for some foods, such as breads, batters, etc., you'll need to add herbs at the beginning of the cooking process.

When you cook with dried herbs, remember that they are more concentrated than fresh varieties. To substitute fresh for dried, use three times as much of the fresh herb. For example, if a recipe calls for one teaspoon of dried basil, use one tablespoon of fresh basil. (3 teaspoons = 1 tablespoon) When substituting, you will often be more successful substituting fresh herbs for dried herbs, rather than the other way around.

HEALTHY COOKING WITH FRESH HERBS

Adding fresh herbs is a quick way to transform *ordinary* meals into *extraordinary* meals. Besides helping flavor foods while cutting back on salt, fat and sugar; herbs will offer additional benefits of their own. Researchers are finding many culinary herbs (both fresh and dried) have antioxidants that help protect against diseases such as cancer and heart disease.

Experiment with the following flavor and food combinations to add new zest to frequently eaten favorite foods:

Beef – Basil, Marjoram, Oregano, Parsley, Tarragon, Sage, Thyme

Pork – Rosemary, Sage, Thyme

Poultry – Basil, Chives, Cilantro, Marjoram, Oregano, Parsley, Rosemary, Sage, Tarragon, Thyme

Fish – Basil, Chives, Cilantro, Dill, Oregano, Parsley, Rosemary, Tarragon, Thyme

Carrots – Dill, Marjoram, Mint, Tarragon, Thyme

Green Beans – Dill, Marjoram, Oregano, Tarragon, Thyme

Potatoes – Dill, Parsley, Sage

Summer Squash – Dill, Parsley, Sage

Tomatoes – Basil, Dill, Marjoram, Oregano, Parsley