

Drying and Storing Herbs

Drying Herbs

If you have an herb garden, you'll find that home-dried herbs can be just as tasty as those bought at the store. However, proper handling is as important to the success of your herb harvest as good cultural practices.

Preparation

Most herbs are at their peak flavor just before flowering, so this is a good time to collect them for drying and storage. To be certain, check drying directions on specific herbs in a reliable reference book. Cut off the herbs early in the morning just after the dew has dried. Cut annuals off at ground level, and perennials about one-third down the main stem, including the side branches.

Wash herbs, with the leaves on the stems, lightly in **cold** running water to remove any soil, dust, bugs, or other foreign material. Drain thoroughly on absorbent towels or hang plants upside down in the sun until the water evaporates.

Strip leaves off the stalks once plants have drained and dried, leaving only the top 6 inches. Remove all blossoms.

Natural or Air Drying

Herbs must be dried thoroughly before storing. Herbs with high moisture content, such as mint and basil, need rapid drying or they will mold. To retain some green leaf coloring, dry in the dark by hanging plants upside down in bunches in paper bags. Hanging leaves down allows essential oils to flow from stems to leaves. Tie whole stems very tightly in small bunches. Individual stems will shrink and fall. Hang in a dark, warm (70°-80°F [21.1°-26.7°C]), well-ventilated, dust-free area. Leaves are ready when they feel dry and crumbly in about 1 to 2 weeks.

Drying Seeds

Seeds take longer to dry than leaves, sometimes as much as 2 weeks for larger seeds. Place seed heads on cloth or paper. When partially dry, rub seeds gently between palms to remove dirt and hulls. Spread clean seed in thin layers on cloth or paper until thoroughly dry.

You also can dry herb seeds by hanging the whole plant upside down inside a paper bag. The bag will catch the seeds as they dry and fall from the pod.

Oven Drying

For quick oven drying, take care to prevent loss of flavor, oils, and color. Place leaves or seeds on a cookie sheet or shallow pan not more than 1" deep in an open oven on low heat less than 180°F (82.2°C) for about 2-4 hours.

Microwave ovens can be used to dry leaves quickly. Place the clean leaves on a paper plate or paper towel. Place the herbs in the oven for 1-3 minutes, mixing every 30 seconds.

Silica Gel or Salt Drying

Silica gel or non-iodized table salt can be used to dry or "cure" non-hairy leaves. Clean and blot dry leaves before placing them in a tray or shallow pan of the silica gel or salt. After the leaves have dried, approximately 2-4 weeks, remove the leaves from the drying material, shake off the excess material, and store them in glass containers. Before using, rinse leaves thoroughly in clear, cold water.

Another method of drying herbs is to remove the leaves from the plants, wash them, and spread them thinly on screens to dry, avoiding exposure to bright light. Cheesecloth makes a good screen material and stretches well.

Freezing Herbs

Herbs also can be frozen. Harvest herbs according to recommendations. Wash them thoroughly and blanch them in boiling, unsalted water for 50 seconds. Cool quickly in ice water and then package and freeze them. Washed fresh dill, chives, and basil can be frozen without blanching.

Storage

When completely dry, the leaves may be screened to a powder or stored whole in airtight containers, such as canning jars with tightly sealed lids.

Seeds should be stored whole and ground as needed. Leaves retain their oil and flavor if stored whole and crushed just before use.

For a few days, it is very important to examine daily the jars in which you have stored dried herbs. If you see any moisture in the jars, remove the herbs and repeat the drying process. Herbs will mold quickly in closed jars if not completely dry.

Once you are sure the herbs are completely dry, place them in the airtight containers, and store them in a cool, dry place away from light. Never use paper or cardboard containers for storage as they will absorb the herbs' aromatic oils.

Source: WVU Ext.