

Drying

Herbs

Drying is the easiest method of preserving herbs. Simply expose the leaves, flowers or seeds to warm, dry air. Leave the herbs in a well ventilated area until the moisture evaporates. Sun drying is not recommended because the herbs can lose flavor and color.

The best time to harvest most herbs for drying is just before the flowers first open when they are in the bursting bud stage. Gather the herbs in the early morning after the dew has evaporated to minimize wilting. Avoid bruising the leaves. They should not lie in the sun or unattended after harvesting. Rinse herbs in cool water and gently shake to remove excess moisture. Discard all bruised, soiled or imperfect leaves and stems.

Dehydrator drying is a fast and easy way to dry high quality herbs because temperature and air circulation can be controlled. Pre-heat dehydrator with the thermostat set to 95°F to 115°F. In areas with higher humidity, temperatures as high as 125°F may be needed. After rinsing under cool, running water and shaking to remove excess moisture, place the herbs in a single layer on dehydrator trays. Drying times may vary from 1 to 4 hours. Check periodically. Herbs are dry when they crumble, and stems break when bent. Check your dehydrator instruction booklet for specific details.

Less Tender Herbs — The more sturdy herbs such as rosemary, sage, thyme, summer savory and parsley are the easiest to dry without a dehydrator. Tie them into small bundles and hang them to air dry. Air drying outdoors is often possible; however, better color and flavor retention usually results from drying indoors.

Tender-Leaf Herbs — Basil, oregano, tarragon, lemon balm and the mints have a high moisture content and will mold if not dried quickly. Try hanging the tender-leaf herbs or those with seeds inside paper bags to dry. Tear or punch holes in the sides of the bag. Suspend a small bunch (large amounts will mold) of herbs in a bag and close the top with a rubber band. Place where air currents will circulate through the bag. Any leaves and seeds that fall off will be caught in the bottom of the bag.

Another method, especially nice for mint, sage or bay leaf, is to dry the leaves separately. In areas of high humidity, it will work better than air drying whole stems. Remove the best leaves from the stems. Lay the leaves on a paper towel, without allowing leaves to touch. Cover with another towel and layer of leaves. Five layers may be dried at one time using this method. Dry in a very cool oven. The oven light of an electric range or the pilot light of a gas range furnishes enough heat for overnight drying. Leaves dry flat and retain a good color.

Microwave ovens are a fast way to dry herbs when only small quantities are to be prepared. Follow the directions that come with your microwave oven.

When the leaves are crispy dry and crumple easily between the fingers, they are ready to be packaged and stored. Dried leaves may be left whole and crumpled as used, or coarsely crumpled before storage. Husks can be removed from seeds by rubbing the seeds between the hands and blowing away the chaff. Place herbs in airtight containers and store in a cool, dry, dark area to protect color and fragrance.

Dried herbs are usually 3 to 4 times stronger than the fresh herbs. To substitute dried herbs in a recipe that calls for fresh herbs, use 1/4 to 1/3 of the amount listed in the recipe.

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