



HERB BLENDS

You may combine herbs to make herb blends before packaging. For starters, try one of the suggestions below. Each makes about ½ cup. Package blends in small glass jars or airtight plastic containers.

BOUQUET GARNI (for soups and stews). Mix together 3 tablespoons *each* dried thyme, dried parsley, and crumbled dried bay leaves.

ITALIAN HERB SEASONING (for spaghetti or pizza sauce). Mix together 3 tablespoons *each* dried oregano and dried basil and 2 tablespoons crumbled dried bay leaves.

HERB POULTRY SEASONING (for roasted or broiled poultry and for stuffings). Mix together 3 tablespoons dried rosemary and 2 tablespoons *each* dried sage and dried thyme.

DRYING HERBS

Fresh herbs are one of the easiest foods to dry: at room temperature; in a dehydrator; or in a conventional, microwave, or convection oven. The only method not recommended is sun-drying, because hot, direct sun diminishes the delicate flavor, color, and aroma of herbs.

No matter which drying method you choose, a very low temperature and good air circulation are important to ensure that herbs dry well and to preserve flavor. Drying concentrates the essential oils of herbs, which provide the flavor in cooking. The flavor of dried herbs is more pronounced than that of fresh. For the same flavor as 1 tablespoon fresh herbs, use 1 teaspoon dried.

Some herbs retain their natural flavors better than others during drying. Among those that dry well are bay, thyme, rosemary, marjoram, savory, sage, oregano, and tarragon. Chervil, parsley, and chives are best frozen.

Leafy herbs are easier to dry if the leaves are left on the stems; strip them off when thoroughly dry, and pack for storage. If you dry herbs in an oven or a dehydrator, dry types separately to eliminate flavor exchanges.

PREPARING HERBS FOR DRYING

Rinse herbs in cool water; remove any discolored or dead leaves or stems. Shake off excess water and dry on paper towel. Then choose the drying method that's most convenient for you. Herbs are dry when they crumble easily and their stems snap when bent; seeds should be brittle. *Note:* Although seeds will drop from their pods during the drying process, they are not completely dry until they are brittle.

HOW TO DRY HERBS

To dry at room temperature. Hang herbs by their stems in bunches from the ceiling (called bunch-drying) or lay herbs flat on trays. Dry away from direct sunlight: An attic, covered porch, or kitchen that stays at 65° to 90°F is a good location. If you dry herbs in a covered area outdoors where dew collects, bring them indoors overnight.

Bunch-drying is ideally suited for herbs with long stems, like marjoram, rosemary, and sage. Tie bunches at the stem ends; hang upside down to dry. Bunches may be

dried in small brown paper bags to keep dust from collecting on them and to catch seeds. Gather bag opening around stems and tie; herbs should hang freely inside bag. Cut several ½-inch holes in bags and suspend from the ceiling at varying heights to increase air circulation. Leaves and seeds will be thoroughly dry in a week or two.

Tray-drying works well for herbs with large leaves, like basil, and herbs with stems too short to hang. Use trays of any size. Spread leaves or stems in a single layer. To protect against insects and dust, cover with cheesecloth. Turn leaves or stems each day or two. When leaves crumble easily (about a week), herbs are dry.

To dry in a dehydrator. Spread herbs or seeds in a single layer on dehydrator trays and dry at 90° to 100°F for 2½ to 10 hours. Do not dry herbs with foods that must be dried at a higher temperature. Dehydrator-drying is virtually guaranteed to preserve the flavor and color of herbs.

To dry in a microwave oven. Place four or five stems of herbs on a double thickness of paper towels; cover with a single layer of toweling. Microwave at full power (high) until leaves are brittle: about 2 minutes for small leaves; 3 minutes for large. If leaves are not yet brittle, microwave an additional 30 seconds.

To dry in an oven or a convection oven. Use this method only if the oven can maintain a temperature of 120°F or lower; electric and convection ovens may not be able to maintain this low a temperature. The pilot light in a gas oven often provides enough warmth to dry herbs. Arrange herbs in a single layer on trays. Keep oven door ajar about ½ inch to allow moisture to escape. Watch the herbs carefully because they will dry quickly (1 to 3 hours).

STORING DRIED HERBS

When herbs are crumbly and feel dry, remove the leaves from the stems. Whole leaves keep their flavor longer than those that are crumbled before storage. Package in small glass jars. Inspect during the first few weeks for moisture. If condensation appears, redry. Label and date containers. Store in a cool, dry, dark place. Properly stored, dried herbs retain their flavor and color for up to a year.