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HARVESTING AND PRESERVING HERBS

HARVESTING

Snipping a fresh leaf here and there for a simmering pot is great fun. Most culinary herbs can be used from the time you start thinning out the seedlings. To snip, use scissors, a sharp knife, or your fingernails to take sprigs from a few inches down the stem, just above a set of leaves. Do not weaken your young plants by taking too much off in the beginning while the plants are barely seedlings. As the plants grow, and you snip and clip you are also determining the shape of the growing plant. Where a plant is clipped it will regrow fuller and more lush.

Herbs that send up grassy leaves or stalks directly from the ground such as chives and parsley, should be cut just above the ground to keep the plant attractive.

PRESERVING HERBS FOR WINTER USE

When preserving most herbs, it is best to cut when the flowers are about to open and the oils are most heavily concentrated.

Of course, there are exceptions; parsley is cut when leaves are young; sage in the bud stage and hyssop; thyme and oregano during full bloom.

Harvest early in the morning after the dew has dried but before the hot sun brings out the oils.

Lavender, marjoram and rosemary which are shrubby perennials should be cut back to about half the length of the year's growth.

Seed heads are ready for harvesting when they turn color before they open and scatter their seeds on the ground. Cover clipped seed heads with a clean paper bag. Tie bag opening around stem and hang upside down in a warm, dry place. It will take approximately 2 weeks to dry. The seed heads should feel crisp and crackly to the touch. Seed will separate from the plant as they are drying and will fall to the bottom of the paper bag. The seeds can then be emptied from the bag and placed into a labeled closed jar for storage.

There are several ways to preserve the leaves and stems of herbs: freezing, hang drying, tray drying, and quick drying.

Freezing is recommended for a few tender herbs such as basil, burnet, fennel, tarragon, chives, dill and parsley.

Clip washed leaves with a scissors into very small clippings. Layer in a flat pan and place into a freezer overnight or until frozen. Next day place the frozen herb clippings into a small moisture vapor proof package and seal. Keep frozen till used. A small packet can be kept in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator, where a tablespoon or so at a time can be removed for use.

When drying herbs do not mix type and varieties together, but dry each herb in their own separate bundles.

Clip stems, and clasp together in small bunches with a rubber band. Hang bunches upside down in a warm, dry place away from the sunlight and where air can circulate to take away moisture. Herbs can be stored for winter in this manner but some flavor loss does occur.

To retain a better quality of flavor strip dried leaves, store in a jar with a close fitting lid till used. To use remove leaves from jar, crumble with fingers to bring out oils before dropping into food mixtures.

Tray drying is used for such herbs that are not easily tied into bundles, such as parsley or chives.

Layer herbs over a fine mesh or screen. Place in a warm, dry location away from the sun. In order to have good drying results it is necessary to have air circulation around screen. Most herbs will dry crisp in 7 to 10 days depending on weather.

Store dried herbs in closed jars in a cool place.

In the quick drying method, the herbs are also layered on a screen, mesh, tray or cheesecloth. Place the trays into a warm (150 degree F) oven for drying. Leave door slightly ajar for moisture to escape during the drying process. When herbs feel 'crisp dry' remove from trays and place in a tightly closed container for storage.

Dehydrators are also excellent for drying herbs. Follow dehydrator's instructional manual for processing the herbs.