

Drying Herbs

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Drying herbs is easy. All you need are the herbs and warm, dry air.

Dry them when they are fresh

If purchasing cut herbs, dry them as soon as possible. The best time to harvest most herbs for drying is just before the flowers open. Leaves near the top of the plant have the most concentrated flavor. Harvest in the morning after the dew is gone. This minimizes wilting.

Handle them gently

Try to avoid bruising the leaves. You can use the leaves, flowers, stems and seeds. Use scissors to cut stems and leave 4 to 6 inches of stem for later growth.

Rinse them thoroughly

Rinse herbs in cool water to remove any soil and gently shake them to remove excess moisture. Discard bruised, soiled or damaged leaves and stems. Look carefully for insects.

Dry them indoors

Sun drying is not recommended because herbs lose more flavor and color outdoors. There are two methods:

Electric dehydrator

Drying in a dehydrator is fast. It's easy because temperature and air circulation are controlled. Pre-heat the dehydrator with the thermostat set to 95 F to 115 F. If indoor humidity is high, you may need to set the thermostat as high as 125 F. Place herbs in a single layer on dehydrator trays. Dry for 1 to 4 hours, checking periodically. Herbs are dry when they crumble, and stems break when bent. Refer to your appliance's instruction booklet as needed.





Air drying

Herbs can be tied in bundles or leaves can be dried individually depending on the kind of herb. Air dried herbs and seeds need to be treated to kill insects and insect eggs. This can be done by heating the dried herbs and seeds at 160 F for 30 minutes. However, this can reduce the flavor. If you plan to save seeds for planting, do not heat. For better flavor, freeze the dried herbs and seeds at 0 F or lower at least 48 hours.

Less Tender Herbs

Rosemary, sage, thyme, summer savory and parsley are the easiest to dry without a dehydrator because they are sturdy. Tie them into small bundles and hang them to dry. Hang them away from the sink, stove or dishwasher where there is moisture. Hanging herbs in a paper bag punched with holes will keep dust off herbs. Close the top of the bag with a rubber band. Hang the bags in a place where air currents will circulate through the bag.

Tender-Leaf Herbs

Basil, oregano, tarragon, lemon balm and the mints mold if not dried quickly due to their high moisture content. Tie these herbs into small bundles and hang them inside paper bags to dry. If bundles are too large, the herbs will mold. Tear or punch holes in the sides of the bag for good air circulation.

Leaves of mint, sage or bay can be dried separately. This works better than drying with stems in areas of high humidity. Lay leaves on a paper towel, without allowing them to touch. Cover with another towel and layer of leaves. You can dry five layers at a time. For herbs with small leaves, lay leaves on fine stainless steel or food-safe plastic screen or paper towels to dry. Dry in a very cool oven. Turn the oven light on to provide a little heat for overnight drying.

Microwave drying

Follow the directions that came with your microwave oven to dry small quantities. Parsley, basil and celery leaves dry well in microwave ovens with lower wattage (less than 1,000). A higher wattage is usually too hot, and the herbs dry too fast. If your microwave oven has wattage of 1,000 or above, you may be able to reduce the power level. How long to microwave herbs depends on the amount and type of herbs. Start with 1 minute and mix the herbs every 30 seconds. It may take 2 to 3 minutes on high per cup of herbs.

Package and store dried herbs properly

Crumple crispy dry leaves between your fingers. If they are easy to crumble, they are dry and ready to be packaged and stored. Leaves may be left whole and crumbled as you use them, this preserves the flavor, or coarsely crumbled. Remove husks from seeds by rubbing the seeds between the hands and blowing away the chaff. Store them in airtight containers in a cool, dry, dark area to protect color and fragrance.

Use less dried herbs than fresh herbs in recipes

Dried herbs are usually 3 to 4 times stronger than fresh. Use 1/4 to 1/3 of the amount of fresh herbs stated in the recipe.

Sources: "So Easy to Preserve", 6th ed. 2014. Bulletin 989, Cooperative Extension Service, The University of Georgia, Athens. "Drying Herbs," 2013. Penn State Extension, The Pennsylvania State University.

This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) under an agreement with the State of Tennessee.

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