

Harvesting & Preserving Herbs—according to “Herb Whisperer” Charlotte Gardner

General Harvesting Tips: Harvest herbs early in the day (before the heat of the day, but after the dew has dried them off). Essential Oils & flavor are at peak as flower buds start to form, but allowing flowers to develop encourages & nourishes pollinators, and really has no major negative impact on flavor! Handle herbs gently when harvesting and keep in a single layer to avoid excessive bruising if possible.

Perennial Herbs should only be harvested sparingly the first year or two for best long-term plant health. Harvest only about 1/3 of the plant material thereafter and stop harvesting by late August/early September because the new growth that harvesting/pruning encourages will likely be damaged from frosts in our area. Use sharp pruners to harvest the woody stems in order to not harm the plants!

Annual Herbs may be harvested often throughout the growing season once the plants have developed a good bit of leafy growth. The whole plants may be harvested as the frost date approaches, since they will be damaged and will not “come back” the following year. Use sharp snips or scissors to harvest stems of the fleshy growth, or pick individual leaves of large leaf herbs.

General Preserving Tips: Always be sure that the plant material is clean. Carefully pick thru and discard any yellowed or unhealthy plant material prior to processing. If herbs are dirty, or have insects, gently rinse them off and then remove moisture on towels or use a salad spinner to dry them.

Air Drying/Dehydrating: Find a warm, but not excessively hot place in the house (with good ventilation and air flow) to dry your herbs. Avoid areas where dust, dirt or insects are prevalent for sanitation reasons (outdoor drying is not encouraged for this reason). Most herbs are best dried right on their stems; however, for large leaf herbs it is best to remove the leaves and dry them individually. Lay whole stems (or leaves) in a single layer on a cookie sheet, cake cooling rack (w/cookie sheet underneath to catch leaves that fall off), on screens, or some similar arrangement. Herbs can also be dried on their stems in bundles and hung upside down to dry, but mold is often a problem with this method. Inspect the stems often as they dry and discard any that appear to be beginning to mold. Running a fan in the drying area is helpful, but not necessary if there is good natural air flow. It is important to start the drying process immediately after harvest for best results. A commercial dehydrator also does an excellent job of drying herbs—just follow the same process as well as the instructions from the manufacturer. A dehydrator removes the moisture at a low temperature and that does a great job to preserve the flavor of your herbs. Some folks dry their herbs in the microwave, but since that involves extremely high heat, the essential oils are likely damaged; thus, that method is usually not highly recommended. Herbs that are dried on the stems are best stored in a paper bag so they can “breathe” but be protected from dust and insects. Store bags in a dry, dark, cool spot and inspect them from time to time. The dried stems or individual leaves can also be stored in dark glass or plastic containers, but it is important to inspect them periodically to be sure they are not getting moldy. Remove the leaves from the stems and crush them just before adding to your dish in order to best preserve the flavor and the essential oils. There are many dried herbs that combine well for culinary/cooking use, or for tea. Experiment with savory herb blends for cooking (such as rosemary, sage, thyme, & basil) or “sweet herbs” (such as lemon verbena, lemon balm, mints, chamomile, & Roselle) for tea. Keep in mind that dried herbs are considerably stronger than fresh herbs; basically 1 tsp dried = 1 tablespoon fresh (3:1 ratio).

Infused Salts or Sugar: These products are great for long-term preservation of your herbs and they make excellent & unique herbal gifts! The best results come from using Kosher or canning & pickling salt. Infused salts can be made using dried herbs (follow the basic procedures described above to dry them).

Woody herbs (such as rosemary “needles”) can be coarsely chopped up in a food processor before being added to the salt or left whole. Leafy herbs can be slightly crumbled by hand or be left whole and added to the salt. A good rule of thumb is to use twice as much salt as herb (2:1 ratio). Use a clean/sterilized jar (such as a canning jar) with a non-corrosive lid (such as a plastic or canning jar lid--salt will make an uncoated metal lid rust). Start with a layer of salt, then herb, then salt ‘til jar is almost full, but it is important to leave at least ½ inch between the last layer of salt and the lid to avoid problems! Infused salt can also be made with fresh herb leaves that have been pulverized (in a mortar & pestle or food processor) then combined with salt then left out to dry on a plate or a cookie sheet for several days. Stir mixture several times a day to speed up the drying process. Be sure that the mixture is completely dry before putting in a clean/sterilized jar for long-term storage. Store the infused salt in a cool, dark place. It is amazing how well the flavor of the herb infuses into the salt for a unique gourmet treat! Infused sugar can be made using the same procedure. Thoroughly dry “sweet herbs” such as lavender, lemon verbena, & various mints are good candidates for this product. Use the same layered method as described for salt. The infused sugar can be used to flavor and sweeten beverages, fruit, cereal, or used in place of sugar in baked goods. The same 2:1 ratio of sugar to herbs works well for the infused sugar product.

Herbal Vinegars: Another way to preserve the essence of your home-grown herbs is to make herbal vinegars. For best results use good quality culinary vinegars such as red wine vinegar, balsamic, white wine vinegar, rice vinegar, or a good quality cider vinegar (cider vinegar is significantly less expensive than the other vinegars and it can be used in small amounts to “extend” the more expensive types). Follow the same harvesting procedures as for drying, but it is of the utmost importance that herbs to be infused in vinegar that will be used as a food product need to be totally free of any dirt, insects or unhealthy foliage! It is also important to use a clean/sterilized jar (run thru dishwasher or steam jar in water—a canning jar is best since it will resist the heat of the vinegar). It is best to rinse the herbs for the infused vinegar, but it is not necessary that herbs be totally dry before placing in the sterilized jar (just shake excess water off before packing into jar). To achieve a nicely flavored vinegar, it is best to use 2 to 3 cups of fresh herbs per quart of vinegar. Keep leaves or fronds of herbs on stems rather than using individual leaves that will float to the top—herbs need to be totally submerged in the vinegar to avoid spoilage! Bring the vinegar to just about steaming (do not allow to boil) in a stainless steel/non-reactive pan (do not use aluminum pan or utensils). Gently pour heated vinegar over the herbs in the jar and bruise slightly with a wooden spoon to start the infusion process. Place jar in a warm place, but not in direct sun while infusing. The process can take from several weeks to several months, depending on your tastes or how strong you want the finished to be. When vinegar tastes how you like it, strain the herb out of the mixture and decant into smaller clean/sterilized jars. Place the finished product in a cool dark place for long-term storage. It makes a nice presentation if you insert a healthy & clean spring of either the same or a complimentary herb into a decorative bottle to be used for a gift!

Freezing: Is the best method to retain the color & flavor of your home-grown herbs. For small leaved herbs or those with ferny fronds, it is best to keep the leaves on the stems. For larger leaf herbs pick off individual leaves and arrange in a single layer on a cookie sheet and freeze overnite, then put in a labeled freezer bag for long term storage. Do not thaw herbs before using—chop up while frozen and add to the dish toward the end of cooking time or sprinkle chopped herb over dish as a garnish. Herbs can also be made into a pesto-type product (with oil) and frozen in ice cube trays. The cubes can be added (still frozen) into sauces or soups where they will impart nice fresh tasting herbal flavor. Herbs can also be chopped fine, covered with either oil or water in ice cube trays or small freezer containers. Edible flowers can also be frozen in water in ice cube trays then used in punches or cocktails for a nice presentation.