

## HARVESTING, PRESERVING and STORING HERBS

*Growing an herb garden can be an exciting way to begin your spring. Cooking with herbs is an excellent way to season foods without using extra fat. Many herbs can be dried or frozen for later use. In addition, herbs can be used in place of room air fresheners, as potpourri, as a linen closet sachet and in dried wreaths or arrangements. Cultivating an herb garden is an easy project that can enhance your health as well as your windowsill.*

### Growing an Herb Garden

Many herbs can be grown year-round. Annual herbs, such as *anise, sweet basil, chervil, dill,* and *sweet marjoram,* are usually started in the spring from sown seed and harvested in the fall. Perennial herbs are usually started from rooted cuttings and divisions of plant roots. They include *sweet bay, chives, mint, parsley, rosemary, sage, French tarragon* and *thyme.* *Basil, sage, parsley, chives,* and *rosemary* will do well both indoors or outdoors as long as there is ample sunlight and protection from the cold.

The easiest way to start an herb garden is to buy plants and transfer them



to a window box. Your local farmers market is a wonderful source for herb plants. You can also use cuttings to transplant, or you can

grow your own plants from seeds. Fill a small container with potting soil and sprinkle with water. Then scatter seeds over the surface and cover with a thin layer of soil and water.

When the seedlings develop leaves, transfer to a larger pot. Your herb garden needs at least six hours of sunlight a day.

### From Garden to Kitchen

Harvest herbs by snipping off flowers or leaves, preferably early in the morning. The maximum flavor of the herb is highest right after the dew disappears. When you have usable leaves, clip the plants back so they will fill out. Clip herbs before they flower because the flavor begins to lessen. Once harvested, use fresh herbs within a week. Store washed herbs in the refrigerator in an airtight container to keep them moist.

### Preserving Herbs

If you have too many fresh herbs to use, dry or freeze them. To freeze, simply wash and place in an airtight container in the freezer for up to two months. For storage up to six months, first wash the herbs. Then either remove all moisture by microwave individual leaves laid out on a tray for 1 to 1½ minutes or blanch for 45 seconds in boiling water.

The easiest way to dry herbs is to wash carefully, blot dry and hang upside down by the stem. Cover with paper bags to prevent dust from accumulating on the plants during drying. Do not hang in the sun. Once the herbs are dry and brittle, strip the leaves from the stems. Store dried herbs in airtight containers in a dark place.

Herbs can also be added to commercial vinegar to yield appealing blends. With white vinegar, try thyme, marjoram and a bay leaf, mint or salad burnet.

With apple cider vinegar, try an herb blend, mint, chives or basil.

For wine vinegar try rosemary and tarragon. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.



To prepare *herb vinegars*...

- Crush or bruise 1 cup of loosely packed fresh herbs for each quart of vinegar. For dried herbs, use  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup for each quart of vinegar.
- Only use commercially prepared vinegars with 5% acidity. Homemade vinegar may not have a low enough pH to prevent bacterial growth.
- Place the vinegar in a pot on the stove and heat, but do not boil.
- Place the herbs in a clean, sterilized jar and slightly bruise them.
- Pour the vinegar over the herbs and cover the jar tightly.
- Let the herb-vinegar mixture steep in a dark place at room temperature.
- Shake the jar every couple of days.
- Taste after one week. If the flavor is not strong enough, allow to steep an additional week or repeat the steeping process with fresh herbs.

- When the flavor is right, strain the vinegar and return to clean, sterilized bottles. Seal the bottles with sterilized lids and label.
- Store for up to six weeks.

## Cooking with Herbs

Experimentation with different combinations of herbs will enable you to use less salt, experience unique flavors and still have delicious dishes. Herbs are not meant to replace the flavor of the food but to enhance natural flavors.

For best results, chop or mince herbs before cooking. Volatile oils are released when the leaves are bruised, which provides their unique flavors. If you are substituting dried herbs for fresh, use about one-third of the amount of fresh herbs called for in the recipe. For dishes that require a long cooking time, add delicate-flavored and ground herbs at the end of the cooking time so their flavor will not escape with the steam. Some herbs, such as bay leaves, require longer cooking times.

*With a little practice and creativity you can season healthier by cooking with herbs. Since your meals will be so delicious, you and your family will be more likely to stick to a nutritious diet. So give growing, preserving and using herbs a try.*

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## Hints for Beginning to Use Herbs

Herb	Uses
Basil	Goes well with fish, shellfish and vegetables such as tomato, zucchini and eggplant.
Chives	Use in fish dishes, soups, salad dressings and on baked potatoes or steamed vegetables. Chives taste better when preserved by freezing rather than drying.
Dill	A mild herb that is excellent in yogurt sauces, rice dishes and soups. Goes well with fish and vegetables such as cucumbers and carrots.
Oregano	Essential to Italian cuisine, oregano is found in most tomato sauces and Italian dishes. Use in salad dressings, soups, or bean and vegetable dishes. Oregano tastes best dried.
Rosemary	Use this strong, fragrant herb when making roasted potatoes or chicken, homemade bread, soups, rice and marinades.
Parsley	Use parsley dishes to spice up salads, soups, bean dishes, fish and vegetables such as tomatoes, artichokes and zucchini. Fresh parsley is preferred over dried parsley.
Thyme	An aromatic herb that goes well with poultry, seafood, and many bean and vegetable dishes including eggplant, tomatoes, mushrooms, squash and onions.

### Additional Reading

Farrow, Joanna. **Cooking with Herbs through the Seasons**. Southwater Publishing, 2002.

International Herb Association web site <http://www.iherb.org>.

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