

USING AND PRESERVING HERBS

USING FRESH HERBS

Wash fresh cut herbs in cold water; pat dry and then let air dry.

Strip the leaves from the stem in a downward motion while holding on to the top of the branch and pulling toward the cut end.

Cut or chop (knife or scissors) herbs only when you are ready to use.

Soft green stems may be used. Woody stems should be discarded.

Herbs can be processed with the liquid or oil in a recipe and then used.

Any herb can be used fresh for food seasoning or tea brewing.

You must use fresh cut herbs within a few days because they quickly diminish in flavor.

You can place herbs in a damp cloth or paper towel and then put in sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator.

Long herb branches can be placed in a narrow-necked vase of water and used as needed for a few days.

PRESERVING HERBS FOR LATER USE

Although fresh is best, it is not always possible. The most common way to preserve herbs is to dry them. However, many herbs can be frozen which results in an end product much closer to fresh than dried. Frozen herbs will appear limp and discolored so they are no longer suitable as garnishes or with raw food but are excellent in cooked dishes. Herbs can also be chopped and blended with enough oil to make a paste. This method is a close second to the taste of fresh herbs.

DRYING HERBS

The flavor of dried herbs is much more pronounced than fresh herbs. Use lesser amounts in cooking. Woody stemmed or tough leaved herbs such as thyme, rosemary, and oregano dry well and retain their flavor. The soft leaves and stems such as basil, parsley, cilantro and chives, lose flavor when dried. These are far superior fresh or frozen.

To obtain the best success and quality in drying most culinary, tea or potpourri herbs, strip larger leaves from branches. Some tender stems can be used and are fine, especially in teas.

If you are drying flowers for teas or potpourri, pull the flowers apart and break it up, discarding the back. They will dry faster. Tiny rosebuds and other very small flowers can be dried whole.

Wooden frame tray topped with window screen

Hang-drying (bunches of tied herbs upside down); Our climate is often too humid for air drying.

Microwave (only if manufacturer doesn't warn against it)

Dehydrator Drying

Oven-Drying

FREEZING HERBS IN PASTES OR PESTOS

"Pesto" is a name derived from pestle of mortar and pestle which was used originally to blend fresh herbs and oil. Today, we use food processors and blenders but the intense flavors of the fresh herbs are retained. By freezing these herb pastes/pestos we can enjoy pestos year round.

Pesto is traditionally made with basil paste, but other herbs such as chervil, cilantro, dill, fennel, marjoram, mint, parsley, rosemary, sage, savory and tarragon also make delicious pastes. When using herbs that don't provide a lot of green bulk, such as thyme, you need to add another herb to extend the volume. For flavor, color, and texture flat-leaf parsley is the best; although, spinach, kale, watercress and sorrel all work well. This addition will dilute the flavor and intensity of the original herb. In the case of strong herbs like rosemary and thyme, this may be desirable. With basil there is no need to dilute its flavor.

HERB PASTE

Coarsely chop 2 cups firmly packed washed and dried **fresh** herb leaves in a food processor.

Slowly drizzle in 1/3 to 1/2 cup high-quality olive or other salad oil while the motor is running. Use only as much oil as needed to bind the mixture. The mixture is fairly thick.

Pack the herb past in small plastic or glass jars; remove any air bubbles by running a knife through the mixture. Cover the top of the mixture with more oil (1/4 inch) to seal out any air, and freeze. Can last up to 2 years frozen.

USING HERBAL PASTES

Pastes are concentrated. Use sparingly and add more if needed.

Add a tablespoon to steamed vegetables and toss to coat.

Brush onto grilled meats.

Rub onto meat before roasting for flavor.

Use as part of total oil measurement in salad dressings.

Use as part of total oil when sauteing meats or vegetables. (Moderate temp to prevent herb burn.)

Stir into sour cream, cream cheese, or yogurt and add salt and garlic to make a dip for chips or veggies.

Add 2 or 3 tsp. to 2 cups of cream-, wine-, or stock-based sauces after the sauce has been reduced.

Add 1 or 2 Tablespoons to meat marinades.

FREEZE HERBS IN BAGS

Strip washed and dried leaves off the stalks and chop or leave whole.

Pack in bags or containers, seal, and freeze.

FREEZING HERBS IN ICE CUBES

Chop and spoon washed and dried herbs into ice cube trays.

Pour water or stock over the herbs and freeze.

Pop them out as needed or pop them out and store in a sealed bag or container in the freezer.

FREEZING HERB BUTTERS

Chop 3 Tablespoons of fresh herbs. (Single herb or combination of several herbs.)
Stir 1 cup of softened butter until smooth.
Add finely chopped herbs.
Taste and add more herbs if needed. Flavors do develop more fully after several hours.
Refrigerate or freeze until ready to use.

HERB TEAS

Place 1 Tablespoon fresh herbs or 1 teaspoon dried herbs into a tea strainer.
Place strainer in cup and pour boiling water over it.
Allow to steep 5 to 7 minutes.
Sweeten with honey or sugar, if desired.
Favorite herbs for tea-chamomile, lemongrass, mint, lemon balm, lemon verbena, rose hips

HERB VINEGARS

Select any herb, or combination of herbs, that you like. Wine vinegar is recommended as a base. White wine vinegar is used when color is important, such as with chive blossoms or opal basil. Red wine vinegar is used for strong flavors, such as basil, oregano, and garlic.
Sanitize fresh herbs by briefly dipping them in a solution of 1 teaspoon household bleach and 6 cups water. Rinse herbs well and pat them dry.
Place 1 cup prepared herbs in a sterilized quart jar. Pour 3 to 3 1/2 cups vinegar heated to just below boiling (190 degrees F.) over the herbs.
Seal the jar and place in a cool, dark spot for 3 to 5 weeks. Shake every few days.
Taste. If mixture is too herbal, dilute with more vinegar. If the mixture isn't flavorful enough, repeat the procedure with fresh herbs.
Strain through a plastic (not metal) colander to remove the herbs. Then strain through paper coffee filters until the vinegar is crystal clear.
Pour vinegar into hot sterilized, dry jars. Add a sprig or two of fresh sanitized herbs. Cap immediately.
Store in a cool, dark place or in the refrigerator to retain the best flavor.
Marjoram, opal basil, burnet, chive blossoms, tarragon, thyme, nasturtiums, rosemary, lavender, and rose petals are best with white wine vinegars.
For red wine vinegar, choose strongly flavored herbs, such as basil, dill, garlic, sage, fennel, lovage, spearmint or peppermint, bay, thyme, chives, caraway, or savory.

Information from Escambia County Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program

