

Drying & Harvesting Herbs

Using home-dried herbs is a delightful way to bring the flavor and aroma of your summer garden to winter meals. Drying herbs is an easy and satisfying project, requiring little in the way of equipment or time. More important, home-dried herbs are far fresher and tastier than those bought commercially, which may have been sitting in a warehouse or on a supermarket shelf for months. Popular culinary choices include basil, oregano, and rosemary. Herbs used to brew soothing and flavorful teas, such as mint, lemon verbena, and lemon balm also dry well.



1 HARVESTING

While herbs can be dried at any stage of growth, their volatile oils, which give them their flavor, are most concentrated when the plants are forming flowers. For the best flavor, harvest in the morning, when the oils are concentrated in the leaves. Use scissors or sharp pruning shears to cut the stems cleanly. During the growing season, you can safely cut herbs back by as much as two-thirds—as the plants regrow, you will be able to harvest more stems later. For perennials, stop harvesting four to six weeks before your first expected frost to prevent new growth, which is tender to frost damage.



2 SORTING & CLEANING

Pick through your harvest and discard any leaves that are yellow or damaged. Wash any that are dusty by filling a bucket with clean water and swishing them around gently. Shake off the water and pat them dry with towels.

3 BUNCHING & DRYING

Keep your bunches small—about a half-dozen to a dozen stems—so that air can circulate easily around the stems. Tie the bunches together with rubber bands and hang them from hooks on the ceiling or from unbleached paper clips attached to wires stretched across the room. (Rubber bands work better than string, which will loosen as the herbs dry.) To retain their maximum flavor and color, dry your herbs in a dark and airy location, such as a garage, attic, or spare bedroom. The temperature should be warm, but not hot. Herbs with large thick leaves, such as sage, will dry faster with less chance of spoiling if you remove the leaves from the stem and lay them in a single layer on a piece of window screening. Elevate the screen to promote air circulation and turn the leaves daily to hasten drying.



4 STRIPPING

Drying time can vary from a few days to a couple of weeks, depending on the type of herb, air circulation, and the weather. Check your herbs every day or two. When the leaves feel crisp and crumble easily, they are ready for storage. Strip the leaves into a bowl or paper bag. Try to keep them whole so that they retain the most flavor.

5 STORING

Place the leaves in glass jars with tight-fitting lids. If you have a large quantity of any one herb, put it in several smaller jars rather than one large one, since the leaves in unopened jars will retain flavor longer. Label the jars with the name of the herb and the date. While jars of dried herbs look attractive on the shelf near the stove, the herbs will retain their flavor and color longer if stored away from heat and light. A dark, cool cabinet is ideal. Check the jars after a few days to see if any moisture has condensed on the inner surface. If this happens, remove the herbs and spread them out on a rack to dry further. Most dried herbs will retain their volatile oils for about a year. Plan on renewing your supply annually for best flavor.

