

PRESERVING HERBS

If your garden is bursting with fresh herbs, preserve some for a time when things are not so green. Also at the first sign of frost, it's time to harvest those herbs in your garden and bring them inside to dry or freeze for later use. Annual herbs can be cut off at the ground but Perennial herbs should not be cut down completely - harvest only the tips of branches and tender leaves.

The best time to pick herbs is on a clear day, just after the morning dew has dried, before the heat of the sun starts to dissipate the herb's natural oils. Before preserving, you should wash the herbs very gently in cold water, drain thoroughly, but gently, on towels before proceeding.

Air dry herbs: Gather herbs in small bunches, tying the ends with string or raffia, twist ties or rubber bands. Hang the herbs in bunches, upside down, in a dim, airy place away from any source of heat or moisture. You could use a beamed ceiling or a drying rack, anywhere that allows circulation between the bunches of herbs. This may take 4 - 14 days, depending on the type of herb and the warmth and humidity of your drying area.

Herb leaves can also be stripped from the stems and dried in a single layer on mesh rack (window screen works well). Leaves are dry when they are crisp and brittle.

Oven dried: The quickest way to dry herbs is in the oven. Set in single layer on mesh rack or foil lined baking sheet. Heat the oven to its lowest setting. Place the herbs in the oven and leave until completely dry, which should take two to four hours depending on the herb. Cool before storing. Herbs are dry when the leaves crumble off the stem. Do not crush leaves until using them.

Once the herbs are dry they should be stored in airtight jars away from heat and moisture. Use within 6 months to a year for best flavor. When you use dried herbs, crush between your fingers to release the flavor.

Dried herbs are stronger in flavor than fresh, use in recipes 1 part dried to 3 parts fresh.

Freezing: Strip the herb leaves from the stems and lay on a baking sheet. Freeze until firm and then pack into freezer bags. You can also chop the herbs in a food processor with a little water and freeze in ice cube trays. Once frozen solid, unmold and pack in freezer bags.

Use the herbs straight from the freezer as you would fresh herbs.

PRESERVING HERBS, cont.

CHART FOR DRYING AND FREEZING SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE HERBS

Basil:	Freeze leaves whole or ground in small zip lock bags, laid flat.
Bay:	Dry leaves
Chives:	Best fresh, but can be frozen. Snip into pieces first.
Dill:	Dry seeds. Freeze leaves
Oregano:	Dry leaves while still green
Parsley:	Freeze leaves, Italian Parsley is better for this
Rosemary:	Dry on the stem and then pull off for storage
Sage:	Dry leaves whole on or off stem and pull off for storage
Savory:	Dry whole leaves on stems
Tarragon:	Best fresh, but leaves can be frozen on the stem
Thyme:	Dry or freeze whole stem segments

