



## Harvesting and Drying Herbs

James C. Schmidt, Horticulturist  
University of Illinois

An herb garden that is carefully planted and maintained is sure to reward its creator throughout the whole season. The delightfully pungent scents that emanate from the herb garden are a most pleasant reward to the senses. Even more importantly, the rewards are seen in the subtle culinary flavorings, fragrant potpourris, and delicious teas that are made from the herbs.

Your herbs can, of course, be used fresh all through the growing season. To extend the use of herbs into winter months, you should plan to harvest and dry them during the summer and fall months. By using the following suggestions as a guide, the proper gathering and drying of herbs can also be a satisfying experience for you.

### HARVESTING

Harvest time is determined by the growing condition of the herb, rather than a specific date or month. Most herbs are ready to be harvested just as the flower buds first appear but before they are fully open. The leaves contain the maximum amount of volatile oils at this stage of growth, giving the greatest flavor and fragrance to the finished product.

It is important to harvest herbs at the proper time of day. Gather them early in the morning, just after the dew has evaporated and before the sun is hot. This is also a very pleasant and fragrant time to be in the garden, so the task can be an enjoyable one.

#### *Annual herbs.*

Leafy annual herbs can be cut back quite severely when harvesting them. Use a sharp knife or pruning shears and cut just above a pair of leaves, leaving approximately 4 to 6 inches of the stem for later growth. If an annual herb is grown for its seed (such as dill), do not cut it back and use the leaves. In this case, allow the plants to mature fully and form their seeds; then harvest them. Collect the seedheads just as they turn brown. Cut them from the plant and place in a paper bag for carrying to the drying area. After the seeds drop off into the bag, spread them out on a tray and let them dry thoroughly.

#### *Perennial herbs.*

Leafy perennial herbs should not be cut back as heavily as the annual kinds. Remove only about one-third of the top growth at a time and, in some cases, only the leafy tips. Use caution when harvesting to carefully prune the perennial herbs so that new growth is encouraged and a compact habit of growth is maintained. Most perennial herbs, such as

tarragon and oregano, are ready to harvest just prior to or during the early part of July. You can probably make a second harvest in September, too. Remember that a sharp knife or pair of pruning shear is a must when harvesting herbs.

## DRYING HERBS

The most commonly used methods for curing herbs are air drying, silica sand drying, and drying with heat. Regardless of the method that you choose, the herbs should be fresh and clean. To clean them, wash the stems in cold water and then drain thoroughly on paper toweling.

*Air drying.* The easiest way to dry herbs is to allow the leaves or entire stems to air dry at room temperature. To dry whole branches or stems, first wash and dry them as described above. Gather 5 to 8 stems together and tie them into a bundle. Place them into a brown paper bag with the stems extending out of the open end. Hang the bag in a dark, warm place (70° to 80° F). It will take from 2 to 4 weeks for the herbs to become completely dry, depending upon temperature and moisture.

Tray drying is the method used most often for short-stemmed herbs or for individual herb leaves. An old window screen or smaller drying trays fashioned from 2" x 2" lumber and screening works well. By placing spacers at the bottom of each tray, the trays can be stacked to allow for good air circulation and to take up a minimum of space. Keep the trays in a warm, dark place until the herbs are thoroughly dry. Once emptied, store the trays in a clean place until the next time they are needed.

*Silica sand drying.* Drying herbs in silica sand is essentially the same process as that most commonly used for drying flowers. *Note, however, that this method should not be used that are to be consumed.* Silica sand, available from local building supply dealers, draws moisture out of plant tissues and leaves them in their original shapes. Any type of container can be used – old shoe boxes, baking pans, boxes, and the like – but they should be big enough so that the herbs are not overlapping and deep enough so that the plant materials can be completely covered with sand.

First, wash and dry the leaves as described above. Place a shallow layer of silica sand in the bottom of the container, and then arrange the herbs on top so that they do not overlap. Then cover them with more silica sand. Place the container in a warm room. It will take from 2 to 4 weeks until the herbs are thoroughly dry. At that time, remove them from the container, shake off all the sand, and store them in glass jars.

*Drying with heat.* An ordinary gas or electric oven, or a microwave oven, can be used for quicker drying of herbs. Drying with heat is faster, but if the herbs are desiccated too quickly at too high a temperature, much of the flavor, oils, and color of the herbs can be lost. To oven dry, place the leaves or stems on a cookie sheet or shallow pan and warm at no more than 180° F. for 3 to 4 hours with the oven door open. To dry your herbs in a microwave oven,

place the clean stems or leaves on a paper plate or towel and set the control to high for 1 to 3 minutes. Turn the stems over or mix the leaves every 30 seconds.

## STORING HERBS

After the herbs are completely dried, store them in airtight jars in a cool, dry place. If entire stems were dried, remove the leaves and crush or crumble them before placing them in jars. Remember that it is important to have the herbs completely dry; otherwise, they may mold. Keep the jars away from light and heat, since both destroy the quality of the herbs.

## OTHER METHODS OF PRESERVING HERBS

*Freezing.* Many herbs can be successfully frozen, and they retain their freshness after being thawed. To freeze herbs, first harvest and wash them thoroughly, then blanch in boiling water for a minute or two. Cool them quickly in ice water, drain thoroughly, and put them in packages. Label each package and place in the freezer. Herbs such as parsley, chives, and basil can be pureed with a small amount of water in a blender, then poured into ice cube trays. When the cubes are thoroughly frozen, they can be stored in labeled plastic bags and later used to flavor soups and sauces as needed.

*Herb vinegars.* Herb vinegars are easy to make. Depending on the kinds and flavors you want, place the herb(s) in a jar or bottle and cover them with white vinegar. For a stronger flavor, heat the vinegar just to boiling. Otherwise, cold vinegar works okay. Secure with a lid and store in a cool, dry place. After steeping for 4 to 6 weeks, the vinegar can be poured off into smaller bottles.

*Herb butter.* Soften 1/4 pound of butter at room temperature. Add about 4 tablespoonsful of dried herb leaves and a dash of lemon juice. Beat with an electric blender until light and fluffy. Store in the refrigerator in a covered container.

*Herb mustard.* Mix 8 tablespoonsful of dry mustard, 8 tablespoonsful of flour, 4 tablespoonsful of salt, and a teaspoonful of sugar. Add to this mixture enough vinegar to make a smooth paste. Divide into four portions, and into each portion mix 1 tablespoonful of your favorite herb(s).

## HARVESTING, PRESERVING, AND USING SOME COMMON HERBS

**Anise** – The green leaves can be cut whenever the plants are large enough. The seeds are ready to harvest when they turn brown. Wash the seeds in warm water, drain thoroughly, and allow to air dry. Use the leaves in salads, soups, beverages, meats, game, and poultry. The seeds are used to flavor cakes, breads, and cookies.

**Balm, Lemon** – Fresh leaves can be picked anytime. For dry leaves, harvest just before the plant flowers. Hang in bunches to dry, or place on trays. Use in herb teas and as a garnish for iced tea. Adds a pleasant taste to lettuce or fruit salads.

**Basil, Sweet** – For fresh use, harvest the leaves as they mature – about 6 weeks after planting. For dry use, harvest the leaves just before the plant blooms. One of the most popular herbs, basil is used mainly with tomato and egg dishes, stews, soups, and salads, but also with many vegetable, poultry, and meat dishes.

**Caraway** – The seeds are harvested after they turn a gray-brown color. Scald the seeds in boiling water, then dry thoroughly. Use the seeds in breads, cakes, cookies, potato salad, and baked fruit (apples, for example). Also can be used in Hungarian-type dishes, coleslaw, sauerkraut, cheese spread, meat stews, and fish casseroles.

**Chervil** – For fresh use, pick the tips of the stems once a month. For dry use, harvest leaves just before the blossoms open. Dry on trays. Use fresh leaves the same as you would parsley, such as in salads, salad dressings, soups, egg dishes, and cheese soufflés.

**Chives** – Leaves can be harvested anytime during the growing season. Cut them off close to the ground. They can be pureed with water in a blender and frozen in ice cube trays. Chives add a mild onion-like flavor to dips, spreads, soups, salads, omelets, casseroles, and many kinds of vegetables.

**Coriander** – The leaves, which are only used fresh, can be cut for seasoning as soon as the plants are 4 to 6 inches tall. The seeds can be harvested when the heads turn brown. Coriander seeds smell and taste much like a mixture of sage and orange, and can be used in baking, poultry dressings, and French salad dressing.

**Dill** – The fresh leaves can be harvested as needed and used as seasoning. Seedheads should be harvested when the seeds ripen to a light brown color. Leaves and seedheads are most commonly used in the making of dill pickles. The leaves also add a characteristic flavor to salads, cottage cheese, soups, fish dishes, omelets, sauces, and vegetable casseroles. Dill seed is sometimes used in pastries, sauces, sauerkraut dishes, and for flavoring vinegar.

**Fennel** – The leaves can be harvested and used fresh. Fennel seeds are harvested when the seedheads turn brown. Dry them in a paper bag. Florence fennel is harvested when the bulbs are large enough. The anise-flavored leaves and seeds of this herb are widely used in fish dishes, cheese spreads, and vegetable dishes. The leaves and stems can be used in much the same way as celery. Florence fennel bulbs are cooked, used in salads or as the main ingredient in a salad.

**Lavender** – The whole flower spikes are cut just before the florets are fully open and when color and fragrance are at their best. Lavender is most often used in sachets, potpourris, and perfumes.

**Lovage** – Harvest young, tender leaves and use fresh. You can dry or freeze the leaves for later use. Use the celery-flavored leaves in soups, stews, potato salads, meat, and vegetable

dishes. It can also be eaten raw like celery. Its seeds are sometimes used in salads, candies, breads, and cakes.

**Marjoram, Sweet** – To harvest, cut back to 1 inch above the ground before flowering; a second crop with later form. This herb is easily dried or frozen. Use marjoram leaves with meat, poultry, vegetable dishes (especially green beans), potato salad, and egg dishes.

**Mints** – Harvest before flowering and use fresh or dried. Cut off near ground level. A second cutting can be harvested later on. Mint is primarily used for flavoring. The leaves are often put into teas and other beverages and used to make mint jelly (especially good with lamb).

**Oregano** – Harvest and dry before flowering occurs. Oregano imparts a sharper flavor than Sweet Marjoram. It is used to season spaghetti sauces and tomato dishes. Its flowers are attractive in summer arrangements.

**Parsley** – Snip young leaves just above ground level, as needed. Use as a garnish in soups, salads, meats, and poultry. Italian parsley is often used in soups and stews to help “marry” the flavors of other herbs used.

**Rosemary** – Harvest the young, tender stems and leaves, but avoid taking off more than one-third of the plant at one time. For drying, harvest just before the plant flowers. Rosemary is a gourmet seasoning for meats, poultry dishes, and potatoes. Use it either fresh or dried.

**Sage** – Harvest when the plant is just starting to flower and use either fresh or dried. Sage is commonly used to season meats, stuffings, soups, and salads.

**Savory, Summer** – You can gather young stem tips early, but when the plant begins to flower, harvest the entire plant and dry. Savory is used to flavor green beans, vinegars, soups, stuffings, and rice.

**Tarragon, French** – Harvest tarragon in June for steeping in vinegar. For drying, harvest in early to mid-July. Tarragon is often used in various sauces such as tartar and white sauce, and for making herbal vinegar.

**Thyme** – Cut leafy stems and flowers when plants are at the full –flowering stage. Use fresh, hang-dry, or freeze. Thyme is used in combination with other herbs. Leaves can be used with meats, soups, sauces, and egg dishes.