

## PRESERVING HERBS

Several drying and freezing methods for preserving herbs allow you to have preserved herbs that are comparable in quality to fresh herbs. Always pick herbs in early to mid-morning after the dew has evaporated off the plants but while the foliage is still relatively cool. This will ensure high quality. Do not keep foliage that is wilted from heat or dryness.

Basil, oregano, sweet marjoram, summer savory and thyme are most flavorful if picked just as the flower heads form. Pick sweet marjoram and tarragon more than once if the plant is pruned back after the first cutting. The succulent growth of parsley, chives, sage, rosemary and mint can be picked any time during the growing season.

Hang drying is the easiest way to preserve stemmed plants such as basil, sweet marjoram, oregano, sage, rosemary, lemon verbena, mints and dill. After cutting, divide the stems into small bunches and secure them together with a rubber band or string. Hang these upside down in a warm area with good air circulation. Remove the leaves from the stems only after they are completely dry.

Dry other herbs such as sweet marjoram, thyme, parsley, mint or tarragon by laying them in a single layer on newspapers in a warm, dry room. Remove the leaves from the stems prior to drying but do not cut them up as this reduces their flavor. Turn the leaves occasionally to encourage rapid drying.

Microwave oven drying is the fastest way to dry herbs such as basil, sage, parsley, mint and oregano. Place sprigs or leaves in a single layer on a paper towel and then cover them with another paper towel. Heat these in the oven for one minute. Cool and check the leaves for dryness. If they are not totally dry, heat them for a few seconds more.

Store dried herbs in jars with tight lids. Check them occasionally the first few days for mold, which may form if the leaves are still slightly moist.

Some herbs such as chives, sweet marjoram, parsley, mint and tarragon freeze well. Wash herbs thoroughly, and then allow herbs to dry completely before freezing. If possible, freeze entire leaves, rather than cutting up leaves. Place the herbs in a sealed plastic bag and lay them in the freezer.

Using them to make herb butters can also preserve fresh herbs. Cream 2 sticks of unsalted butter, mix with 5 Tbsp. washed herbs. You may also add seasoning like lemon peel. Wrap, seal and place in freezer until ready to use. Butters can be kept for up to 6 months. A suggested mix is tarragon lemon butter for chicken. Pesto can also be a way of preserving herbs. Mixing 1 ½ cups of herbs like sorrel, tarragon, cilantro, rosemary, or basil with 1/2 cup of parsley in a blender with 1/2 cup of olive oil. Cheese if used should be added later. This mix can be stored in the refrigerator or freezer for several weeks with a thin covering of olive oil to preserve color.

Fish sautéed with 1 or 2 tablespoons of a sorrel or cilantro pesto is delicious.

To find more of these simple recipes for herb sauces, mustards, jellies, and honeys, look in your local library, bookstore, or online.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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