

Preserving and Storing Culinary and Medicinal Herbs

Congratulations on your harvest! Having an abundance of food and plant medicine is something to be celebrated all year long. The goal in drying plants is to end up with herbs that closely resemble the living plant in color, aroma, taste and texture. In order to achieve this, processing and putting up for drying must be done as soon as possible after harvest. Plan ahead and harvest your herbs when you know there will time after to start the drying process as well. Keep in mind that it is easy to harvest large quantities of many herbs, but it usually takes considerably longer to process these pickings.



Harvesting:

Each part of a plant has an ideal harvest time. Typically flowers should be harvested as they open, leaving the wilted ones on the plant to mature and form seeds. For especially aromatic flowers, such as roses, it is best to harvest them in the early morning before the hot sun is out. Leaves are at peak potency as the plants begin to form flower buds. Leaves, especially for culinary use, can be harvested at other stages in the plant life cycle, but for medicinal potency they are many times more concentrated in constituents when the plants begin to flower. Roots are always harvested in fall and winter when the plants have become dormant. Harvesting roots to medicine in the spring and summer when the plants are actively growing will reduce the medicinal potency of the harvest.

Drying:

If herbs are dried too quickly by using too much heat, they roast and lost their potency. When herbs are dried too slowly, they can mold and break down. This is especially true in damp climates. Some resinous plants, such as rosemary or sage, may turn brown when dried too quickly due to rapid enzymatic activity. This may also happen to plants that have become bruised from handling. These herbs are best left to air dry slowly in a warm room.

Plants should be laid out to dry as soon as possible after harvesting. When drying aromatic garden herbs (basil, mint, lemon balm, thyme, etc.) it's important to minimize light exposure and ensure good air flow. Herbs can be dried by hanging in small bunches or spreading over screens that are elevated to allow for airflow.

Tips on drying herbs:

- Warm, shaded, well-ventilated areas are best.
- Optimal air temp 85-100 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Direct sunlight rapidly reduces quality.

Bundling herbs and hanging them in a shaded location amidst circulating warm air is a simple inexpensive method to dry plants. Use rubber bands for bindings (as plants dehydrate, they often fall out of twine bindings). Don't make the bundle too large, as it can lead to mold growth on the plant cut off from air circulation in the middle. Dry or drying flower heads that are laden with seed can be bundled together, the heads stuck in a paper bag and secured and the bundles hung up or shaken, allowing the seeds to dislodge and collect at the bottom of the bag.

Methods for drying herbs:

- Stringing bundles on twine
- Laying plants on a fabric in the shade (airflow under the fabric is still important)
- Drying racks (old window screens or fabricated with nylon screen)
- Commercial (or homemade) dehydrators (often need to be set on the lowest setting)
- Ovens can be used (with caution) but must be propped open to allow for airflow

Plants are dry enough to be placed in storage only when all parts are brittle. All parts must snap crisply when bent. So, in most cases, when the stem and all thicker portions of the plant pieces are thick and brittle, the herb is dry enough to be placed into a storage container. Cut large roots to see if the centers are completely dry. If any moisture remains mold and rot will spoil the plant in storage. As soon as they are thoroughly dry, herbs should be processed for storage. Break down bundles, strip leaves, flowers or berries from stems. Separate out the usable parts and compost the rest.

Storage:

Light, heat, moisture and exposure to air deteriorate dried botanicals. Store your herbs in airtight, light-shielding, dry containers that will keep out insects and rodents. Canning jars or clean recycled jars that have wide mouths and tight fitting lids are good options. Glass containers are the best option for aromatic herbs as they hold in volatile oils well. Store them in a cool, dark place (ideal storage temperature is 65 degrees.) Label each container clearly with the name of the plant, the location of the harvest and the date.

Tips on storing herbs:

- Leave herbs as whole leaves or flowers.
- Never powder your herbs until just before using.
- Most herbs, especially aromatic leaves and flowers, should be used up before a year after harvest as they will degrade rapidly. Roots and barks will last up to 3 years if stored properly.
- Once you are sure herbs are dry, store in a cool, dry, dark place in an air-tight container

Properly stored herbs will maintain their value. Most dried leaves, seeds with soft coating and flowers will last up to one year. Many dried roots, stems, seeds with hard outer coating and barks will hold up longer than a year possibly 18-36 months. Powdered herbs diminish in their value rapidly within 3 months or less.