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Getting the Most Out of your Herbs

Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University

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GARDEN NOTES

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR HERBS

By Dennis Hinkamp

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So you tried the herb garden this summer and it's getting to be harvest time. Now what? Or, you want to experiment with fresh rather than packaged herbs, how do you use and store them?

Although "herbs" and "spices" are often used interchangeably in language, they are distinct in culinary arts. Spices come from seeds, roots and bark while herbs generally come from leaves. Cinnamon and nutmeg are spices, while basil and oregano are herbs. There are exceptions, but spices are often more pungent in flavor and aroma than herbs.

You need to remember that the flavor, and hence the most important part of herbs, is the oil of the plant. You want these oils to be released during cooking, not during harvesting and storage. Exposure to light, over heating, bruising or cutting will release these oils before they are needed says Tammy Vitale, registered dietitian and instructor in the Culinary Arts and Food Service Management program at Utah State University.

Even well-kept herbs lose much of their potency after about six months. Open air or very low temperature oven drying is the preferred method of removing the moisture without affecting the oils. The modern alternative to drying is freezing. Freezing herbs as rapidly as possible after picking ensures retention of flavor and aroma. Blanching before freezing isn't necessary.

Of course the optimal way to use herbs is pick them from the garden immediately before cooking. Since most recipes are written using proportions of dry herbs, when you substitute fresh herbs you'll need to add about three times as much as the original dry measure. Also, add fresh herbs towards the end of the process for cooked foods. For uncooked foods, add fresh herbs a little earlier to allow more time for the flavors to blend with the other ingredients.

When gathering herbs for immediate use or for drying, cut whole stems rather than single leaves or flowers to reduce the chance of damage. Lay them in single layers or hang them far enough apart so they don't touch each other. The best time of day to harvest herbs is in the morning after any dew has dried off, but before the intense midday sun.

Stored dry herbs should be kept whole or in pieces as long as possible right up to the time they are used. Breaking them will prematurely release the flavorful oils. When you do want the flavor released, crumble the herbs as you add them to a recipe. Although herbs can be decorative,

for maximum flavor you should store them in dark containers or keep them in a dark place.

If you choose storage by freezing, whole herbs in individually marked bags is the best optimum storage method. You can also chop herbs and store them in small bags or mixed with water or oil in ice cube trays. If measured out, herb ice cubes are handy for adding directly to recipes.

Although the leaves and tender parts of herbs are best for cooking, don't throw away the rest of the plant. Bundles of stems are great flavor enhancers to throw on the hot coals when you barbecue.

ALL PURPOSE HERB VINEGAR RECIPE

Rinse and pat dry enough fresh herb sprigs to fill a glass jar loosely. Marjoram, thyme, tarragon, basil or a combination of red pepper, garlic and oregano are popular, but don't be afraid to experiment. Raspberry vinegar is a beautiful vibrant red and cinnamon basil makes a rosy-colored vinegar.

Fill your jars with white wine vinegar (not distilled). Red wine or rice vinegar can also be used depending on personal preference and color desired. Cover with waxed paper or plastic and tighten on the lids. Let steep at room temperature for three weeks. In hot weather, setting jars in the sun for one week also works well.

At the end of the steeping period, strain the vinegar and herbs through a colander, then through several layers of cheesecloth or a paper coffee filter. Rebottle the strained vinegar and seal, adding a fresh sprig of the original herb for decoration if desired. Flavored vinegars keep well for several months.

YOGURT HERB BREAD RECIPE

1 cup white flour
1 cup whole wheat flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
4 tablespoons melted margarine or butter
2 beaten eggs
1 cup non-fat yogurt
1/3 cup honey
1 teaspoon dried dill
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 teaspoon dried basil
1/2 teaspoon dried tarragon
1 tablespoon dried parsley (optional)

1 tablespoon dried chives (optional)

Note: if substituting fresh herbs use about three times the dried recipe amount.

Sift together the first five ingredients. Beat together the next four ingredients for 3-5 minutes or until frothy. Add the herbs and beat well.

Pour the liquid/herb mixture into the dry ingredients and mix with a wooden spoon until thoroughly blended.

Pour into a loaf pan coated with non-stick spray and bake for 40- 50 minutes at 350 F degrees or until a knife stuck into the center comes out clean.

Note: The flavors of the herbs get stronger if the bread is allowed to age a short time before eating.

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