



J&L Garden Center

*The All Season Gift
and Garden Center*

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Harvesting, Drying and Storing Herbs

We all know, use, and love herbs. Chances are that you've used a product today that has an herbal ingredient. The soap you showered with this morning may have used lavender for its scent. The wool sweater that you're wearing may have been dyed using herbs. The aspirin you took after lunch is derived from a plant, and some experts say that more than 25 percent of drugs currently on the market contain plant extracts. Tonight, when you sit down to your roast beef dinner, your plate will be garnished with parsley, your meat will be spiced with pepper, your carrots will be graced by tarragon, and your potatoes adorned with rosemary. Herbs can make everything smell, taste or feel better.



Benefits of growing your own herbs

Herbs repel pests, making them 'low-maintenance.'

Herbs that you've grown fresh are more flavorful than the dried herbs you can buy at the supermarket.

Herbs are generally easy to grow, and require fertilizers in relatively small amounts.

Herbs add color and fragrance to your garden.

Herbs require little space and can be grown in pots and indoors, in fact, some herbs prefer the indoors.

Herbs can improve your health.

Herbs taste good and jazz up your meals.

Herb fragrance can make you smell good.



Indoor Herb Gardens

Tired of eating bland dishes during the winter, or walking all the way to the garden to snip a few herbs for dinner? Growing herbs indoors year round can be easy and fun, if you know which plants will grow inside, and how to plant them for best results. Choose your favorite herbs, get some good potting soil, and select decorative pots to show off your new indoor herb garden. The taste and convenience will be worth the effort.

Locate a good space in your home for the herbs. A window with a southern exposure is ideal. Most herbs need at least four to six hours of direct sunlight each day. You can supplement the natural light with a grow light if desired, especially during the winter when sunlight is weaker and not as long. Basil plants, for example, will likely need additional light, as they do best with 12 to 16 hours of light per day.

Keep your indoor herbs growing vigorously by fertilizing regularly during the growing season with a good houseplant fertilizer. Since you'll probably want to eat these herbs,



be careful controlling insects and diseases. You probably won't need to worry about many pests on your indoor herbs, but if they appear, try hand-picking them off the plants, or using a gentle insecticidal soap.

You can put your indoor pots outside on your deck or patio during the summer months, but be sure to bring them back inside before the weather gets too cold.

Outdoor Herb Gardens

If you have room, you can make herbs part of your vegetable garden. However, you may prefer to grow some herbs in your flower garden, or in a completely separate 'herb garden' area. You might even like to grow some of the more colorful and frequently used herbs, such as parsley and purple basil, as border plants.

A few herbs, such as mints, need to be contained or they will overtake the entire garden. Plant them in a pot, a can, or in a bucket. Many other herbs can also be grown in patio containers, window boxes, or hanging baskets. Container gardening methods will require a little more care, especially watering them properly.

Harvesting Herbs

Fresh leaves may be picked as soon as the plant has enough foliage to still maintain growth. Annual herbs can be cut back quite severely during the harvest season. Cut just above a leaf, or a pair of leaves, leaving 4 to 6 inches of the stem for later growth. However, if an annual herb is grown for its seed, it should not be cut back and used for the leaves. In this case, allow the plants to mature fully and then harvest the seeds. Collect the seed heads when they are turning brown, by cutting them from the plants, and drying them.

Perennial herbs should not be cut back as heavily as annual herbs. Only about one-third of the top growth should



be removed at a time, and in some cases, only the leafy tips should be removed. Careful pruning insures that new growth will be produced, and a compact habit of growth can be maintained. Most perennial herbs will be ready to harvest during the early part of summer, with a second harvest possible in early fall. Some herbs, such as tarragon, thyme, and oregano, can be harvested more often.



Stop making large harvests of the perennial herbs in early fall, to allow the new growth to harden before winter. However, small harvests can be made during most of the fall. Sage flavor may actually be improved with two or three frosts prior to harvest.

Always cut healthy leaves or branches from your herb plants. They should not lie in the sun, or lay unattended after harvesting. Remove and destroy any dry or diseased leaves. Shake the cuttings gently to remove any insects. If necessary, rinse with cool water and pat dry with paper towels. Wet herbs will mold and rot if not dried immediately. Discard all bruised, soiled or imperfect leaves and stems.

To ensure good oil content, harvest leaves or seeds after the dew has disappeared in the morning, but before the sun becomes too hot during the day.

Most herbs have their peak flavor just before flowering, so this is a good time to collect them for drying and storage. They can still be harvested and dried after they have already flowered, they just might not be as flavorful. To be certain, check drying directions on specific herbs in a reliable reference book.

Once the drying process is started, it should be continued without interruption. Why? Because molds can grow on partially dried foods held at room temperature. This can cause spoilage.

Air Drying

Air drying herbs is the easiest and least expensive way to dry fresh herbs. This slow drying process doesn't deplete the herbs of their oils. The easiest way to air dry herbs is to tie the washed branches of herbs into small bundles (5-6 stems) and hang them upside down, in a warm (70-80°F), dry, well-ventilated area, out of direct sunlight. Strip leaves off the bottoms of the stalks, leaving only the top 6 inches with leaves. Remove all blossoms.



To retain some green leaf coloring, dry herbs in the dark by hanging the plants upside down inside paper bags. Cut holes in the sides of the bags for air circulation. The paper bag also protects them from dust and catches any leaves or seeds that may fall off. Gather the bag around the stems and tie them up. Make sure there is plenty of room inside the bag so leaves do not touch the sides of the bag. Hanging leaves upside down allows essential oils to flow from stems into the leaves.

Let them hang until the moisture evaporates (generally

2-4 weeks). Herbs can be air-dried outdoors, but better color and flavor retention usually results from drying them indoors, in the dark. Check your herbs in about two weeks, to see how things are progressing. Keep checking weekly until your herbs are dry and ready to store - the thicker stemmed herbs will take longer. Check to see if their consistency has become crumbly by rubbing a leaf between two fingers. If they crumble, they are ready to be taken down.



Another way to air dry herbs is to place them on a drying tray. A simple drying tray consists of fine mesh screen or cheesecloth attached to a wooden frame. A small window screen also works well. Place blocks under the corners of the drying tray to insure good air circulation. Place a single layer of leaves or branches on the drying surface and keep the herbs in a warm, dry area until they are thoroughly dry. This is a good way to dry chopped chives.



Another method, especially nice for mint, sage, or bay leaf, is to dry the leaves separately. It will sometimes work better than air drying whole stems. Remove the leaves from the stems. Lay the leaves on a paper towel, without allowing leaves to touch. Cover the leaves with another towel and another layer of leaves. Five layers may be dried at one time using this method.

Air drying works best with herbs that don't have a high moisture content, like Bay, Dill, Marjoram, Oregano, Rosemary, Summer Savory and Thyme.

High Moisture Herbs, such as Basil, Chives, Mint, Tarragon sometimes preserve better in a dehydrator.

Finding the right spot in your house to dry herbs is sometimes difficult. Basements are usually too damp and garages have car fumes. Attics or linen closets are often a good choice. Just make sure they are not too hot, and there is good air circulation, so the herbs don't get moldy.

Dehydrator Drying

Dehydrator drying is a fast and easy way to dry herbs, because both the temperature and air circulation can be controlled. Pre-heat the dehydrator to 95°F to 115°F. In areas with higher humidity, temperatures as high as 125°F may be needed. After rinsing the herbs under cool, running water, and shaking to remove excess moisture, place the herbs in a single layer on dehydrator trays. Drying times may vary from 1 to 4 hours. Check them periodically. Herbs are dry when they crumble, and when the stems break if bent. Check your dehydrator instruction booklet for specific details.



Oven Drying

Use a gas oven, an electric oven, or a microwave oven, to dry herbs only as a last resort. Ovens actually cook the herbs to some degree, diminishing the oil content and the flavor.



When drying with a conventional oven, spread a layer of leaves, or stems, on a cookie sheet, or shallow baking pan. Place the herbs in a warm (up to 180°F) oven for 3 to 4 hours. Leave the door open and stir the herbs periodically until they are thoroughly dry. Be careful, herbs shouldn't be dehydrated too quickly. At too high of a temperature, much of the flavor, the oils, and the color of the herbs will be lost.

A second oven method is the *cool oven method*. Remove the leaves from the stems and arrange them on a paper towel without the leaves touching. Cover this layer with another towel, and add another layer of leaves. Five layers may be dried at one time using this method. Dry them in a very cool oven. The oven light of an electric range, or the pilot light of a gas range, usually furnishes enough heat for overnight drying. Leaves dry flat and retain a good color.

Microwave ovens are a fast way to dry herbs when only small quantities are to be prepared. Be sure to follow the directions that come with your microwave oven.



When using a microwave oven, place 4 or 5 herb branches in the oven between paper towels, or between paper plates. Set the control on high for 1 to 3 minutes; turn the stems over or mix the leaves every 30 seconds. If not brittle and dry, repeat microwave drying for 30 seconds more. Be careful, the heat generated during microwaving not only removes moisture, but it also removes some of the oils. These herbs may not have as intense a flavor as herbs dried by other methods.

Drying Herb Seeds

To dry herb seeds, such as dill, caraway, and coriander, harvest the seedheads just before they turn brown, so that the seeds don't fall off while cutting. Wash dirty leaves and seed heads in cold water and drain thoroughly before starting the drying process. Cut off the entire seed head and place it in a paper bag. Place the bags in a warm, dry area. Seeds generally take longer than leaves to dry. After drying, shake the seeds loose into the bag and remove any chaff. Spread the clean seeds in thin layers on cloth or paper until they are thoroughly dry.



You also can dry herb seeds by hanging the whole plant upside down inside a paper bag. The bag will catch the seeds as they dry and fall from the pod.

Seeds should be stored whole and ground as needed. Seeds retain their oil and flavor better if they are stored whole and crushed just before use.

Herb Seeds includes anise, caraway, coriander, cumin, dill, and fennel.

Drying Herb Roots

Dig the roots and cut them off during the plant's dormant stage. The best time is usually during fall and winter, when there is sufficient food stored in the plant. Cut only



a few tender roots from each plant. Scrub them with a vegetable brush to remove the dirt. Leave thin roots whole, but you can slice thick roots lengthwise for quicker drying.

Turn your oven to the lowest possible setting. Heat that is too high will cause the oils in the roots to dissipate, reducing the flavors. Place whole roots, or slices, on a baking sheet and place in a warm oven. Leave the oven door open a crack, if possible. Dry the roots in the oven for 6 to 8 hours, depending on the thickness of the roots or root slices. Roots should be hard and brittle when dried.

Herb Roots: Includes angelica, burdock, comfrey, ginger, ginseng, and sassafras.

Freezing Herbs

Select appropriate herbs for freezing. This method works well for soft-leaf herbs such as basil, borage, chives, dill, lemon-grass, mint, oregano, sage, tarragon, thyme, sweet woodruff, sorrel, lovage, parsley, summer savory, and winter savory. Some herbs are better frozen as they don't dry very well, such as chives, dill, savory, and sorrel.



Wash and dry freshly picked herbs. Strip the leaves off the stems and place them into freezer bags or containers. Label and date them as they should keep for up to 3 months. If you want them to last longer, blanch them for a few seconds in hot water and then dip straight into ice-cold water and pop them into the freezer in bags/containers. Blanched herbs will freeze for up to 6 months.



Some cooks prefer to freeze herbs in ice-cube trays, so that they have handy little sizes for cooking use. If you choose to do it this way, freeze approximately one-third chopped herbs to two-thirds water. Basil is great pureed with olive oil before freezing in ice cubes (don't add water). Remove herbs frozen as ice cubes, and store them in plastic freezer bags. Remove and use these pieces as needed.



Some herbs, such as parsley, chives and basil can be pureed with a small amount of water in a blender, and then frozen in an ice cube tray. They can later be stored in plastic bags for use in flavoring soup and sauces. Frozen herbs will keep their flavor for several months.

Unlike dried herbs, where the flavor gets more concentrated when drying, frozen herbs can be used in the same proportion as fresh herbs.

Storing Herbs

Test herb leaves, seeds, and roots for dryness before putting them into storage. Place them in tightly sealed jars, in a warm place for about 1 week. Check the jars regularly for moisture. If moisture appears on the inside of the glass jar, or under the lid, remove the contents for further drying. Otherwise, there is a chance of mold growth.



When the leaves are crispy dry, and crumble easily between the fingers, they are ready to be packaged and stored.

Dried leaves may be left whole and crumpled as used, or coarsely crumpled before storage.

Once you are sure the herbs are completely dry, place them in the airtight containers such as zip-lock plastic bags, small canning jars, or tightly sealing plastic containers. Be sure to label and date your containers. Store them in a cool, dry place away from light, to protect both color and fragrance. Never use paper or cardboard containers for storage, as they will absorb the herbs' aromatic oils, and leave dried herbs tasteless.

It is very important to examine the jars in which you have stored dried herbs. If you see any moisture in the jars, remove the herbs and repeat the drying process. Herbs will mold quickly in closed jars, if not completely dry.

Dried herbs will keep for years, but most herbs are best if used within a year. As your herbs lose their color, they are also losing their flavor. Discard any dried herbs that show the slightest sign of mold. Sage is the about only herb that will grow stronger in flavor during storage.

Rule of thumb: *Dried herbs are usually 3 to 4 times stronger than the fresh herbs. To substitute dried herbs in a recipe that calls for fresh herbs, use 1/4 to 1/3 of the amount listed in the recipe. Use about 1 teaspoon crumbled dried leaves in place of 1 tablespoon of fresh leaves.*

Silica Drying Herbs

Silica Sand Drying is the same process that is commonly used to dry flowers. Silica sand draws the moisture out of the plant tissues and leaves them in their original shapes. Any container will do, as long as it is big enough to allow all of the plant materials to be covered with sand. The leaves should be clean and dry. Place a shallow layer of silica sand in the bottom of the container, then arrange herbs on top so they don't overlap; then cover with more silica sand and place container in a warm room. It will take 2 to 4 weeks until the herbs are thoroughly dried and can be removed from the sand for storage in glass jars.

Steeping in Oil

Choose an oil; olive oil is preferred but any other oils that you like are generally fine. You have the choice of keeping the leaves attached to the stem, or removing them and adding them separately. If you want to use the oil as herbal flavored oil, the stems are fine. Place your herbs in a bottle or other container; herb leaves remaining on their stem inside the oil bottle look very attractive as ornamental arrangements, as well as being useful culinary items. If you wish to remove the herbal leaves for cooking, a short, wide container is preferable to enable you to scoop out the herbs and oil.

Keep in a cool or refrigerated place, especially during warmer months. Use within 6 months of preparation.



Other Herb Uses

Herb vinegars are an extremely popular use for home grown herbs. To make herb vinegar: place herbs in a jar or bottle. Cover with white vinegar and secure with a tight lid. Store the bottle in a cool, dry place. After steeping for 4 to 6 weeks, the vinegar can be poured off into smaller bottles and capped.

Herb butter can be made with the addition of about 4 tablespoons full of dried herb leaves and a dash of lemon juice to 1/4 pound of butter softened at room temperature. The butter should then be stored in the refrigerator, in a covered container.

Herb mustard is a mixture of 8 tablespoonsful of dry mustard, 8 tablespoonsful of salt and a teaspoonful of sugar with just enough vinegar to make a smooth paste. The mixture should then be divided into four portions; into each portion mix one tablespoonful of desired herbs.

Potpourri is a mixture of dried herbs and flower petals that preserves the aromatic fragrances of the summer months. Most potpourris start with dried roses and lavender as a base, to which other dried herbs may be added. The herbs used depends on your personal preference, and availability. Some popular herb choices include: sweet basil, lemon verbena, sweet marjoram, lemon balm, scented geranium, rosemary, thyme and mint.

To make a potpourri begin by mixing 4 to 6 cupfuls of various dried petals and leaves in a large bowl. Add a tablespoonful of whole cloves, cinnamon, or ginger. To blend the herbs and to make them last, add a fixative such as calamus root, benzoin, or orris root. Only one ounce is needed per batch. The mixture should be stored in jars with tight-fitting lids, and be shaken or stirred occasionally. After 4 or 5 weeks, the potpourri mixture should be well blended and can be placed in ornamental canisters or sachets.

Specific Herbs

Anise-(A)- *The green leaves can be cut off whenever the plants are large enough. The seeds are ready when they turn brown. Wash in warm water, drain thoroughly, and allow to air dry.*

Use: The leaves can be used in salads, soups, beverages, meats, game, and poultry. The seeds are used to flavor cakes, bread, and cookies. Leaves and seeds also add a delightful scent to sachets and potpourris.

Basil, Sweet-(A)- *For fresh use, harvest the leaves as they mature-about 2 weeks after planting. For dry use, harvest leaves just before the plant blooms. Use: One of the most popular herbs, used mainly with tomato and egg dishes, stews, soups, and salads, but also with many vegetable, poultry, and meat dishes.*

Caraway-(B)- *The seeds are harvested after they turn a gray-brown color. Scald the seeds in boiling water, then dry thoroughly. Uses: 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-(A)- For fresh use, pick the tips of stems once a month. For dry use, harvest leaves just before the blossoms open. Dry on trays. Uses: Use fresh leaves the same as you would parsley, such as in salads, salad dressings, soups, egg dishes, and cheese souffles.



Chives-(P)- Leaves can be harvested any time during the growing season. Cut them off close to the ground. Can be pureed with water in a blender and frozen in ice cube trays. Uses: Chives add a mild onion-like flavor to dips, spreads, soups, salads, omelets, casseroles, and many kinds of vegetables

Coriander-(A)- 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. Uses: Coriander seeds smell and last much like a mixture of sage and orange and can be used in baking, poultry dressings, and French salad dressing. Much used in Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Latin American cuisine.

Dill-(A)- The fresh leaves can be harvested as needed and used as seasoning. Seed heads should be harvested when the seeds ripen to a light brown color. Uses: 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 seeds are sometimes used in pastries, sauces, sauerkraut dishes, and for flavoring vinegar.

Fennel-(TP)- The leaves can be harvested and used fresh. Fennel seeds are harvested when the seed heads turn brown. Dry in a paper bag. Florence fennel is harvested when the bulbs are large enough. Uses: 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 used in salads or as the main ingredient in a salad.

Lavender-(P)- The whole flower spikes are cut just before the florets are fully open and when color and fragrance are at their best. Uses: Lavender is most often used in sachets, perfumes, and potpourris.



Lovage-(P)- Harvest young, tender leaves and use fresh. You can dry or freeze the leaves for later use. Uses: Use the celery-flavored herb 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.

Majoram, Sweet-(A)- Cut back to 1 inch above the ground just before flowering; a second crop will form for later use. Easily dried or frozen. Uses: Use Marjoram leaves with meat, poultry, vegetable dishes (especially green beans), potato salad, and egg dishes.

Mints-(P)- Harvest before flowering and use fresh or dried. Cut off near ground level. A second cutting can be harvested later on. Uses: Used primarily for flavoring. The leaves are often put into teas and other beverages, as well as lamb sauces and jellies.

Oregano-(P)- Harvest and dry before flowering occurs. Uses: 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-(B)- Snip young leaves just above ground level, as needed. Uses: Use as a garnish in soups, salads, meats, and poultry. Decorate your gourmet dishes with a little greenery.

Rosemary-(TP)- 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. Uses: A gourmet seasoning for meats, poultry dishes, and potatoes. Use either fresh or dried.



Sage-(P)- Harvest when just starting to flower and use either fresh or dried. Uses: A commonly used seasoning for meats, stuffings soups, and salads.

Summer,Savory-(A)- You can gather young stem tips early, but when the plant begins to flower, harvest the entire plant and dry. Uses: Used to flavor fresh garden beans, vinegars, soups, stuffings, and rice.

Tarragon,French-(P)- Harvest tarragon in June for steeping in vinegar. For drying, harvest in early to mid-July. Uses: Often used in various sauces such as tartar and white sauce, and for making herb vinegar.

Thyme-(P)- Put leafy stem ends and flowers when plants are at the full-flowering stage. Use fresh, hang-dry, or freeze. Uses: Used in combination with other herbs. Leaves can be used with meats, soups, sauces, and egg dishes.

A=Annual B=biennial P=Perennial TP=Tender perennial

Grow a few of your own herbs to use them in your kitchen, in your crafts, and for healing purposes.



Herb or Spice?

The difference between spices and herbs can be fairly arbitrary, depending on who you talk to.



Herbs generally grow in temperate areas, and are usually the fresh, or dried leaves and stems. Some herb are also grown to use their seeds and roots.

Spices generally grow in tropical regions. They are usually dried, and come from the root, bark, seeds, buds, berries, or fruit of woody plants and trees. They are usually brown, black, or red, and may be used whole, or ground in powder form. Some of the more common spices are; black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, ginger, turmeric, cumin and cardamom.

Herbs tend to have a mild flavor, while spices tend to be stronger, and have a more pungent taste.



More Resources

<http://extension.usu.edu/juab/files/uploads/Horticulture/herbs/herb%20container%20garden.pdf>

http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/factsheet/pub_2757969.htm

<http://ohioline.osu.edu/ss-fact/pdf/0208.pdf>

<http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/herbs-and-flowers>

http://extension.oregonstate.edu/fch/sites/default/files/documents/sp50921_drying_herbs2009.pdf

<http://medicalcenter.osu.edu/PatientEd/Materials/PDFDocs/nut-diet/nut-other/herbs.pdf>

http://www.extension.org/pages/How_to_Dry_Herbs

