



HYG-5520-09

Selecting, Storing, and Using Fresh Herbs

Cooking with herbs can add interesting flavors to foods, especially when salt, sugar, and fat are reduced in a recipe. They are a quick way to add a new flair to your favorite meals. Many culinary herbs, both fresh and dried, have antioxidants that may help protect against diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease.

Because herbs are so popular, they are being sold fresh at the roadside market and grocery store and are often grown as part of a kitchen garden by the homeowner.

Selection

Herbs are best harvested in the morning, after the dew has evaporated, but before the sun has warmed them. The oils that give herbs their aromas and flavors are volatile (readily escapes from the leaves, seeds, and stems if injured). Therefore, herbs need to be handled very gently, and should never be “stacked” or handled in such a way that they may be bruised. Select just enough herbs to be used, dried or frozen, the same day. Herbs should look fresh and clean, be free of disease, not discolored or damaged.

Storage

Since the flavor and aroma of herbs deteriorates quickly after picking, be prepared to use them immediately. If you must store them for a few hours, keep them in the refrigerator in a perforated plastic bag. When you are ready to use them, wash the herbs gently under cool (not cold) water and pat dry between paper towels.

To extend the freshness of herbs, trim off the ends of the stems on the diagonal. Arrange herbs in a tall glass or vase with an inch of water, like cut flowers. Cover

loosely with a plastic bag to allow for air circulation. Place in the refrigerator and change the water daily. Herbs may last a week or more stored this way.

For long-term storage, herbs can be dried. Store the dried herbs in airtight containers out of the direct sun.

Culinary Uses

Once you have used fresh herbs in cooking you will be spoiled! Their special flavor and aroma contributes greatly to the enjoyment of food.

Chop or mince fresh herbs with a knife or scissors. Putting herbs in a food processor will turn them into a paste. Usually, the part of the herb you will use will be the leaves. For herbs with sturdier stems, such as marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, and thyme, you can strip off the leaves by running your fingers firmly down the stem from top to bottom. Other herbs have tender stems, like parsley and cilantro. For these herbs, it's all right if some of the stem is mixed in with the leaves when cutting these herbs.

There are no rules when cooking with herbs. Start to experiment using small amounts of herbs and see what you like. The following ideas may help you get started:

- A good general guideline is not to mix two very strong herbs together, but rather one strong and one or more milder flavors to complement both the stronger herb and the food.
- In general, the weaker the flavor of the main staple item, the lower the level of added seasoning required to achieve a satisfactory balance of flavor in the end product.

- Dried herbs are stronger than fresh, and powdered herbs are stronger than crumbled. A useful formula is: ¼ teaspoon powdered herbs = ¾ to 1 teaspoon crumbled = 2 teaspoons fresh.
- Leaves should be chopped very fine because the more cut surface exposed, the more flavor will be released.
- Be conservative in the amount of an herb used until you are familiar with its strength. The aromatic oils can be strong and objectionable if too much is used.
- The flavoring of herbs is lost by extended cooking. Add herbs to soups or stews about 45 minutes before completing the cooking. But for cold foods such as dips, cheese, vegetables, and dressings, herbs should be added several hours or overnight before using.
- For casseroles and hot sauces, add finely chopped fresh or dried herbs directly to the mixture.
- To become familiar with the specific flavor of an herb, try mixing it with margarine or butter, let it set for at least an hour, and spread on a plain cracker.
- Try herbs as a flavoring in vinegars or “butters.” Use one cup of “bruised” leaves for every 2 cups of white wine vinegar. Allow to steep two weeks. Use 1 tablespoon of finely chopped fresh herbs to ½ cup margarine, butter, cottage cheese, low fat yogurt, or cream cheese.

Culinary Herb Uses	
Herb	Some Uses
Anise	Pork, chicken, fish, stews, beverages, stewed fruit. Seeds in baked goods.
Basil	Tomatoes and tomato dishes, vinegars, rice, eggs, meats, duck, salads, vegetables.
Chive	Salads, stews, appetizers, vegetables, butter, yogurt and sour cream sauces.
Dill	Fish and fish sauces, cottage cheese, breads, beets, cucumbers, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, salads.
Fennel	Tomato dishes, eggs, fish, marinades for meats, carrots, pickles, breads and baked goods.
Marjoram	Stews, soups, meats, tomato dishes, vegetables, eggs, breads, French dressing.
Mint	Salads, lemonade, tea, potatoes, scallops, sauces and jelly, sherbet, lamb, fruit.
Oregano	Italian tomato sauces, barbecue sauce, soups, eggs, cheese, pork, vegetables, salad dressings.
Parsley	Tomato sauces, fish, meats and poultry, soups, stews, vegetables.
Rosemary	Lamb, pork, vegetables, chowders, cheese.
Sage	Fish, meat, poultry stuffing, chowders, soups, tomatoes.
Savory	Pork, chowders, stews, fish, eggs, salads, beans, biscuits.
Tarragon (French)	Eggs, yogurt and sour cream dishes, meat, asparagus, beans, cucumbers.
Thyme (Lemon or English)	Stews, clam chowder, fish, meat, poultry, eggs, stuffings, bread, biscuits, lima beans, broccoli, onions.

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