



Stonehouse Farm

3320 Church Street

Slatington, PA 18080

610-767-8610

SEASONING HERBS ~ How to Harvest and Store for Top Flavor

Along with canning and pickling, seasoning herbs deserve careful harvest and preparation for storage. During summer we prefer herbs freshly picked; but for the cold months we must rely on dried supplies, frozen, salted, or infusions in salad vinegars. Flavors are fleeting; plan for only one year's supply at a time as none should be carried over. When attractively packaged, dried herbs make very acceptable gifts at bazaars and for discerning cooks.

Optimum time to pick herb foliage is on the morning of a warm, dry day. For most kinds that flower, strongest flavoring oils develop just before blooming, and both leaves and sprigs are cut from then on, with potency diminishing after the flowering season. Pick only the green leaves, and never over pick any one stem or plant. Pinch back longer stems to promote fuller growth; if future seeds are not needed, clip off flower stems well before blooming.

DRYING The simplest method requires quick drying after picking. Wash sprigs and leaves, damp-dry without crushing, spread very thinly to dry in an airy, shady place. Screens are ideal for drying trays and can be set up in an attic. Small bunches of sprigs are hung from rafters. Slow oven heat of 100 F dries well. Process only until material is crisp, not longer than two weeks.

Savory twigs are kept whole. Leaves only can be crushed and rubbed through a sieve; some cooks prefer to keep leaves whole until time to use - it is considered this preserves more of the valuable oils. Place at once in glass jars and screw covers on tightly. Label with care; in fact lots should be labelled from time of picking as many look alike when dried. Keep jars out of strong light or in a darkened cabinet, cool if possible. Check occasionally to make certain no moisture remains to make a musty odor. Never attempt to store in paper bags except for the initial short drying period.

FREEZING Tender sprigs can be frozen, usually in small lots only as they cannot be refrozen. Leaves turn limp and begin to darken soon after thawing; time their use at the very last minute. After picking fresh, again wash and damp-dry, roll wrap in saran with a single layer, seal with freezer tape. Label each roll.

Herbs frozen in ice cubes are decorative and flavorful in cold tea or fruit drinks. Mint is commonly used for drinks; rosemary, thyme and basil can be cubed to garnish cold consomme or broth. To make cubes, freeze a layer of water in the cube tray, place the herb in the middle, add more water and refreeze.

Herbs can also be cube frozen for flavoring. Use whole, minced, or finely chopped by blender. For each two cups of water use a cup of herb leaves. Pour into ice trays to freeze. Wrap each cube separately in saran and store the lot in a large freezer bag. At cooking time, melt, add just the herbs to the dish.

VINEGARS French tarragon is best used in vinegars, though thyme, dill, basil, marjoram or mint - alone or in combination can be used. These are the exquisite salad vinegars, preferably based on white or red wines. Bruise the leaves, put in glass jar or crock and cover with warm vinegar (some prefer boiling apple vinegar). Tightly cover and allow to steep for a week or two. Use plenty of foliage in the infusion and stir every two days. Taste; when it seems strong enough, strain and bottle.

SALTING Mints and parsley lose flavor in drying, unless a salt solution is used as a fixative. Add one teaspoon of salt to each quart of water and bring to a boil. Wash leaves, place in a strainer and immerse for two or three seconds in the boiling salt solution. Then shake out excess moisture and place leaves on a screen to dry out rapidly.

Sweet basil can be preserved for winter by salting down in alternate layers in a crock. Foliage remains fresh and green to be used as needed. Other herbs can also be preserved in this way.

Herb butters, herb jellies and herb candies all conjure up mouth watering delights for the Yule season. Do try angelica and Canada ginger.

SEEDS Anise, caraway, coriander, dill, sweet fennel, poppy and mustard all provide flavorful seeds. Watch carefully after blooming, as seeds ripen quickly and fall at the touch. Find a time when heads can be cut without shattering, invert in bags to finish. Later screen or sort out debris, wash and quick dry if necessary before storing as for leaves. Seeds of sweet cicely (Myrrhis) are used green only.

ROOTS Angelica and lovage are dug in the fall when dormant. Wash and scrape the roots, cut larger ones lengthwise. Dry as for leaves, up to six weeks until brittle. Seal in glass jars.

As a final note: To taste the true flavor of an herb you've ever tried before, mix ¼ teaspoon crushed herb with one tablespoon cream cheese or sweet butter. Let stand 10 to 15 minutes, then spread the mixture on a small piece of bread and taste.