

An NKHS How-To Guide

Storing and drying herbs



If possible, choose the herbs you want to pick and dry before the plants have flowered. This will result in much better flavor. If they are already flowering, remember that you can use and eat the herb flowers, not just the leaves.

Pick fresh, tender green herbs around mid-morning, after the dew has dried but before the sun is fully overhead and the heat is peaking. Use a sharp knife or scissors to make a clean cut. Do not pull off stems and leaves with your hands as this bruises the plant and may cause damage.

To store freshly cut herbs for fresh use later:

- Cut long stems from your herb plant.
- Remove the leaves from the bottom third of the stem.
- Place your herbs in a glass of water, taking care not to let any leaves fall below the surface of the water.
- Cover with plastic wrap or bag – Herbs will stay fresh for 5 days.

Herb-infused vinegars and wines are a unique way of storing and using herbs. They don't keep the herbal flavors pure and separate, they're mixed with the flavor of vinegar or wine, but they have a wonderful shelf life – Some people claim they're good for years if kept tightly sealed. and their preparation doesn't require any cooking, drying, or freezing of the herbs.

- Put 1 cup of vinegar, red or white, wine, or cider vinegar in a pint jar
- Add ½ clove garlic (optional) to the jar.
- Bruise two good sized sprigs of your favorite herbs with a wooden spoon and place them in the jar.
- Tightly cover the jar with its lid and allow to sit for 5 days.
- Strain the mixture, transfer it to a nice container, and place on your table as a condiment.

Herbs can also be placed in wine in a tightly-lidded jar and set aside for two to four weeks, then remove the leaves (optional) and place the wine in a nice, tightly-sealed container. It can be used for drinking or as a cooking wine.

Freezing fresh herbs and flowers is the best way to preserve flavor, color and nutrients.

However, frozen herbs become limp and sometimes discolored after thawing so they will not be suitable to use with raw foods. They will be excellent used in cooked foods.

To store fresh herbs, either whole or chopped in the freezer, check herbs carefully, pat dry if wet, then place on a small tray or cookie sheet. Freeze leaves flat and individually. Cover and place the trays in the freezer. When frozen solid, place in airtight containers and return to freezer. Once frozen individually, they will not meld together.

Another way to freeze herbs is to place the leaves on a paper towel in a baggie and make sure all air is out of bag before sealing it. Use a single herb or your favorite mixes.

Use softened butter or margarine to make herbal butters by adding your favorite herbs to the butter and rolling it into a log. Slice this into patties and freeze singly on a tray. When completely frozen, place the patties in a baggie and return them to the freezer.

You can also freeze fresh or dried herbs in water or in ice cube trays for drinks. Or, freeze them in oils, butter or broth for cooking soups, vegetables, omelets, or meats. Pesto, for instance, is great made and frozen ahead of time, especially if you bring it out to enjoy during the winter when basil is scarce. Such herbal treats can be stored in the freezer for six months. Unfrozen, herbs in oil, butter, or broth should not be kept stored in the refrigerator for longer than one month.

Drying herbs can be done very simply and inexpensively or in more sophisticated ways.

Depending upon your personal preferences and how many herbs you typically dry, it may be worthwhile to invest in a commercial dryer or drying racks. Or, do it the old-fashioned way.

Tie the herb stems together and hang them with base of the stem at the top and the leaves and flowers hanging down inside a paper bag that will catch the leaves and flowers as they drop off. An alternative approach is to simply spread the herbs on paper plates to dry.

The bags or plates should be put in a dry place where they won't be in the way (storage room, attic, basement, or car trunk). Depending on temperature and humidity (The hotter and drier, the better.) drying may take several weeks or even months.

When the herbs are completely dry, the portions you want to keep should be transferred whole or chopped into plastic bags, jars, or other tightly sealed containers. Note that dark containers are best because they protect the dried herbs from light. Or, if you prefer, you can store your dried herbs in the freezer at this point.

Oven drying is a much quicker but still traditional method.

Place leaves in a single layer on a cookie sheet with oven temperature at 180 degrees, heat for almost 4 hours. Keep the oven door open the whole time, and gently stir the leaves occasionally.

Microwave drying is quicker still, but it's high-tech and not a traditional, approach. It is, however, a particularly good way to dry basil and chives because they keep their green color much better when dried in a microwave than dried in other ways.

Rinse the herbs by running cool water over them in a colander or if you have a salad spinner, use that to dry herbs, a few sprigs at a time. Or, you can lay the wet herbs between paper towels, patting gently until they are dry.

Lay a small batch of herbs on a dry paper towel in the microwave, then cover with another paper towel. Set the timer for about 2 minutes and start the microwave, checking every 30 seconds or so to make sure the herbs are not starting to burn. At the end of this cycle, remove the herbs and check to see if they are thoroughly dry or require additional drying time. You will probably have to go through this cycle at least a couple of times to fully dry most herbs.

Note: If your microwave has a one-touch "re-heat" button, it may be more convenient than repeatedly entering cook times and re-starting your microwave. You will, however, probably have to punch "re-heat" a few times to fully dry the herbs.

Remove the herbs from the microwave and place them on a dry paper plate to rest and let any residual moisture evaporate into the air.

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