

Harvesting, Using, and Storing Fresh Herbs

Many gardeners raise herbs but don't know how to pick, use, and store them properly to maximize their fresh scent and flavor. Here are 20 tips that show you how.

BY KAY RENTSCHLER

To discover how best to harvest herbs both during and at the end of the season and how best to store them, we made an excursion to Plimoth Plantation in Plymouth, Mass., where we spoke with resident horticulturist John Forti. He offered invaluable advice on a wide variety of culinary herbs.

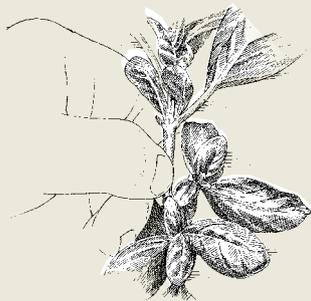
Knowing the Nomenclature

Tender annuals like basil, cilantro, and summer savory are so called because they will not survive a frost and are planted new from seed or small plants every year. Woody perennials like sage and winter savory, so called because of their branching habit and woody stems, can survive much colder temperatures and return year after year.

Whether for immediate use or end-of-season preservation, there are right and wrong ways to harvest specific herbs. Once they are out of the ground, it's important to handle them properly.

HARVESTING AND STORING HERBS FOR SHORT-TERM USE

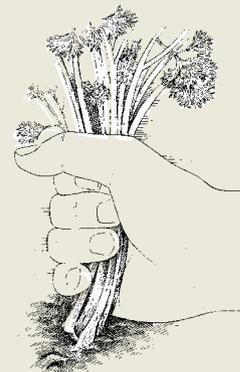
Frequent harvesting and use of fresh herbs throughout the season will help keep plant growth manageable and make your garden a pleasure to look at.



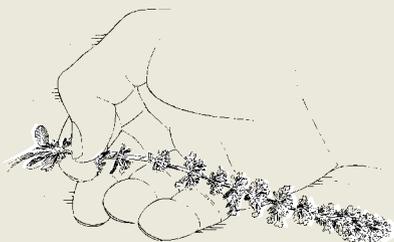
During the summer months, the herbs in kitchen gardens should be harvested to encourage growth. The young, flavorful leaves of tender annuals should be harvested above leaf buds, where the plant branches out. Tender annuals such as basil can be harvested simply by pinching them back.



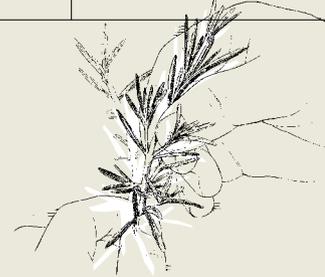
Once a plant's energy goes into the flower, the flavor in the leaves can diminish and become bitter. Annuals such as basil (pictured here), summer savory, and cilantro will live longer if their flowers are pinched back.



Wait to harvest parsley (shown above) and other such herbs, including summer savory, until roots have developed and the plant is strong enough for regrowth. You can use a scissors or a knife to cut the herbs, or you may twist and pull off with your hands.

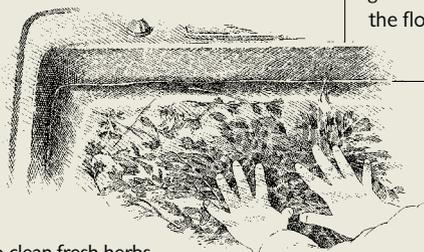


Perennials that have flowered, like the thyme pictured here, should not be harvested back to their branching growth. Instead, harvest fresh young leaves directly below the flowery tops.

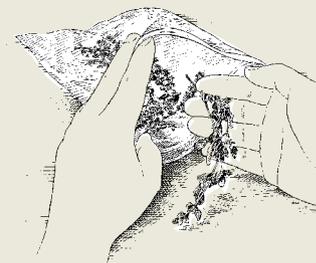
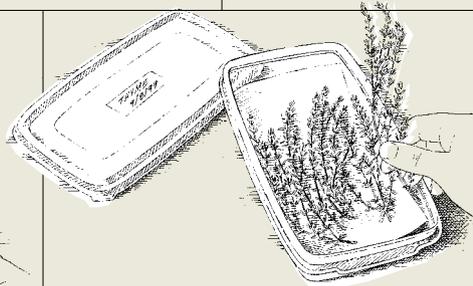
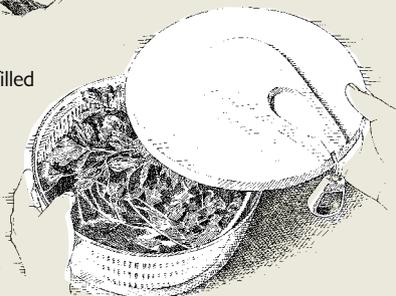


Woody perennials such as rosemary (pictured here) should be harvested at the point at which new branches grow off a central stem (note position of fingers at left) rather than along a central stem; harvesting a central stem slows down new growth.

Illustration: John Burgoyne



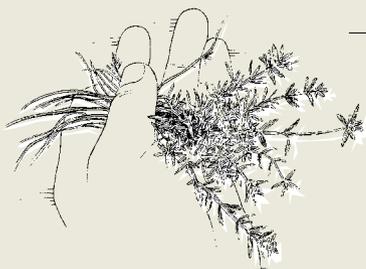
To clean fresh herbs, submerge them in a sink or large bowl (depending on the quantity of herbs) filled with cool salted water (about 2 tablespoons salt per sinkful). The salt water will drive away any insects without damaging the plant itself. Remove the herbs from the standing water, and dry in a salad spinner. To dry herbs completely, blot with paper towels.



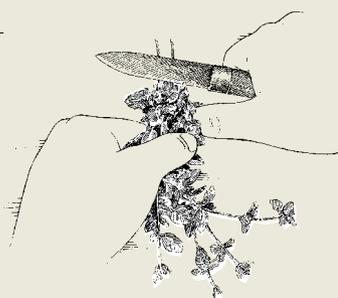
Perennials such as sage and thyme are able to tolerate cold outdoor temperatures (12 degrees Fahrenheit), and thus can be stored in the refrigerator. We recommend plastic containers with tight lids. Stack the clean, dry herbs in loose layers separated by parchment paper or paper towels to allow for maximum air flow between them, and seal tightly. Smaller amounts of herbs can be placed in food storage bags.

HARVESTING AND STORING HERBS FOR LONG-TERM STORAGE

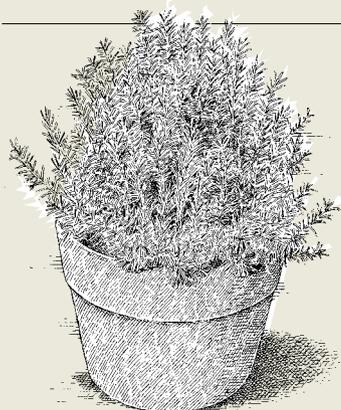
Harvest a plant when it is in its prime and looks vigorous. When considering long-term storage, remember that not all herbs freeze well; some are superior dried.



At the end of the year, an annual such as summer savory (pictured here) can be harvested right to the ground or can be pulled completely out of the ground, roots and all. It is, however, a good idea to leave one or two annuals in their beds; they will reseed and come back much earlier the following year.



Harvest perennials (such as marjoram shown here), completely to the ground with a knife or scissors. With woody perennials, like sage or winter savory, harvest no more than one-third of the plant so as not to compromise its health and vigor the following year.



Rosemary (pictured here), like other perennials, takes well to a pot and can be brought indoors over the winter. Such plants demand cool but well-lit indoor locations; they will not thrive on a warm windowsill.



Herbs such as sage, winter savory, mint, rosemary, marjoram, and oregano are well suited for drying as well as freezing. The classic method is to tie them in bunches by their stems (pictured) and hang them upside down in a cool, dry place for three weeks. We also tried drying clean herbs on oven racks in a closed gas oven for four days. The residual heat from the pilot light produced dried herbs still bright green in color and with vivid, fresh flavor. After drying, separate the leaves from the stems and store in glass jars.

We froze thyme, oregano, sage, tarragon, parsley, and dill for more than three months to gauge the effects on their freshness. Though tarragon and parsley experienced some discoloration, they still smelled and tasted fresh. The other herbs froze very well. Clean and dry the herbs as pictured above and layer them in tightly sealed plastic containers to insulate the delicate herbs from freezer odors. (They can be packed quite tightly; there's no need for the air flow required when these herbs are refrigerated.) Herbs can be frozen for up to four months.

USING FRESH HERBS

Once they are harvested, herbs may need to be plucked or chopped before use.

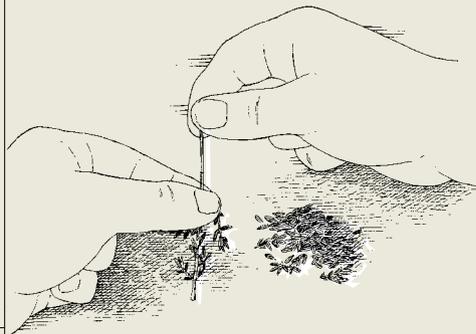


Herb Bouquets

Refrigerator temperatures are too frigid for annuals such as basil and cilantro. They are best held for a day or two in a container of water set at room temperature.

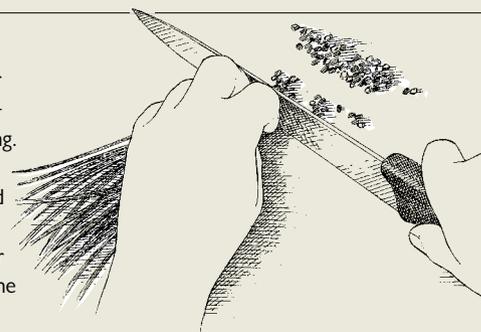
Removing Tiny Leaves

To pluck leaves from stems—whether fresh or dried—hold the stem upside down and run your fingers down the stem in a shredding motion, severing leaves from stem. Tiny leaves, such as thyme, may be used as they are; larger leaves, such as basil, should be plucked from the stem and chopped or torn.



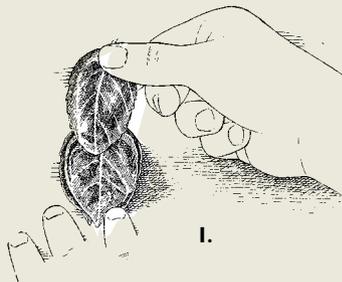
Cutting Chives

Though many recipes call for snipped chives, we find snipping useful only for harvesting. To cut them finely, gather them tightly in one hand and mince finely with the other, turning your fingertips under to shield your fingers from the blade.



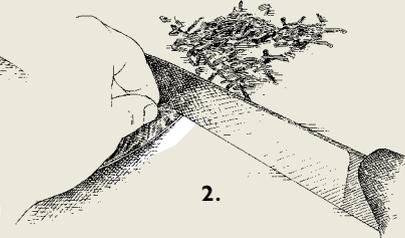
Cutting Large Leaves

For herbs with larger leaves, such as basil and mint, the most attractive and least damaging cut is the chiffonade.



1. Stack 3 or 4 clean dry leaves.

2. Roll them tightly like a cigar, then slice the cigar thinly lengthwise.



Herb Flowers

If you let your herbs flower, that doesn't mean they are no longer useful. Herb flowers are actually delicious, tasting like the essence of the herb itself but with a little added sugar. To use them, pluck the blossom or trumpet of the flower from its green backing. Having sampled these herb flowers, we agree with Fort's assessment of some of their best culinary uses.



BASIL FLOWERS:

salads and tomato dishes

CHIVE FLOWERS:

omelets and grilled meats

MARJORAM FLOWERS:

herb butters and vegetable dishes

SUMMER SAVORY:

hummus

THYME FLOWERS:

most everything

WINTER SAVORY:

fowl or Middle Eastern food