

## Harvesting Your Bounty of Herbs

You've been diligent about picking your seeds or small plants for planting in spring, watched your beautiful herbs grow from little sprouts to large, bushy plants, flowering with delicate or large flowers, sharing their fragrance and taste abundantly.

Now that you've grown all these herbs, how do you harvest the abundance? For many years I grew herbs just to enjoy how they looked and smelled, not really knowing what to do with the plants, except the occasional oregano or parsley in various Italian sauces and dishes. Since that time so many years ago, I've taken a journey that has brought much knowledge about plants, mostly what they offer for our own good health. Growing and harvesting your herbs is one of the joys of life and its easy.



Different herbs are harvested at different times. A few references are mentioned at the end of this article so you can check your herbs' harvesting times. Some herbs are best harvested before they flower (lemon balm, rosemary, thyme, oregano, sage), others while they're in full bloom (lavender, anise hyssop, butterfly weed, dandelion, skullcap), and others for their roots (marshmallow, purple cone flower or Echinacea, dandelion, valerian), berries (elderberry, hawthorn, chaste berry), or bark (slippery elm, oak, elder). So it all depends. When you do harvest, at the peak of harvest time, do so in the morning, preferably on a fairly sunny day and after the dew has dried. Once you pick whichever parts you are harvesting (leaf, flower, root, berry, bark), immediately move the harvested plants out of direct sunlight. The heat of the sun will quickly wilt your herbs and strip the plants of their essential oils, so important for flavor and health. Move the picked plants to a shady area or indoors, where you can gently wash the roots (very gently) and perhaps gently wash other parts of the plants. I generally don't wash leaves and flowers that I'm drying, because I never harvest any plant that's been sprayed, and the plant is generally clean. If you do wash, then you may need to wait for the plant to completely dry before you begin the drying process, depending on which drying method you choose. In cold-



winter areas the last harvest should be six to eight weeks before the first hard freeze to give perennials time to harden off new growth. At your final harvest, cut annuals to the ground and cut back perennials to about two thirds of their height.

Herbs can be gathered in bunches, tied with string or twine, and hung upside down to let the plant dry with appropriate air circulation. This is a nice way to dry herbs with flowers, as you can use these as dried flower bouquets, which is very pretty.

Alternatively, you can use your refrigerator to dry

herbs. Simply place small bundles of freshly harvested herbs in paper bags, label them, and place the partially closed bags on a shelf. The fridge-drying process is slow—about two weeks, depending upon the thickness of the leaves—but may be worth the wait. In the cool environment and relative darkness of the refrigerator, herb leaves retain valuable essential oils and more chlorophyll. You can completely dry the herbs in the fridge and then use them from the bag as needed.

Other methods include using a dehydrator, putting the herbs on a tray in an oven with just the pilot light on (although this is risky because you may forget and preheat the oven to bake, and then ‘poof’, there go all your wonderful herbs!), or placing on screens in a dry, airy place (always out of direct sunlight). A method I prefer for its ease is placing the herbs in a paper bag loosely so air can circulate (this means not stuffing the bag to the brim with your herbs) and gently folding the top, and after labeling the date harvested and the plant harvested, I place in the trunk of my car. An open back trunk is not a good idea – best to use a trunk with a closed top, so no sunlight will enter. You want to use a trunk that does not let in any moisture.

Whatever method used, check every 1-3 days to be sure no mold is developing and to occasionally stir or turn the herbs as appropriate. The goal is to let the plant dry evenly and this requires air to be able to circulate around the plants. Depending on the climate and humidity, drying can take from a few days to two weeks. A fully dried herb will crackle and crumble when rubbed between your fingers. If the leaves are not crisp, they still contain some moisture. When the herbs are crumbly and dry, they are ready to be stored and labeled.

Leave small or needlelike leaves like those of thyme and rosemary on their stems, but remove large leaves from stalks. The rosemary stems can be used as skewers. When left on the stem, you can use the leaves when needed for cooking or for teas or other uses. Other plants can be placed very gently in a storage container (crumbling the leaves releases the essential oils so try not to crumble the leaves too much). You can store your dried herbs in clean, dark-



glass jars or clear jars with tight-fitting lids stored in a dark place. I use mason jars – this way I can see directly what I have and I enjoy looking at my dried herbs. A properly dried herb will retain the same color as the fresh plant – flowers, leaves, berries will all be a similar color. If leaves or flowers or berries turn brown, then they’ve been damaged and are not of any use. Once you have harvested, stored and labeled your herbs, you can use for 1-2 years if kept stored away from direct sunlight, like a pantry or cupboard at room or cooler temperature, without added moisture. The dried herbs can be used in teas, tinctures, cooking, salves, and all kinds of herbal remedies. You will have the knowledge when you use your herbs that you grew your own to benefit you and your family. It’s an amazing feeling of

accomplishment and altruism – you’ve grown food and medicine from the earth and are providing for others. Good health and luck with the coming harvest!

### **References & Resources**

*Growing 101 Herbs That Heal* (Tammi Hartung)

*Herbal Tea Gardens* (Marietta Marcin)

*Practical Herb Garden* (Jessica Houdret)

*The Edible Herb Garden* (Rosalind Creasy)

*Landscaping With Herbs* (James Adams)

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*For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the University of Maryland Extension, (301) 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.*

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