

## Drying Foods at Home Safely

### *Drying Herbs*

An herb garden that is properly maintained can supply an abundance of fresh herbs during the growing season. Drying what you can't use (or give away) is a great way to keep those herbs on hand into the fall and winter months.

#### *Harvesting herbs for drying*

Dry herbs the same day they are harvested. Herbs are ready to be picked right before the flower buds begin to open. At this phase of the growing season, the herbs have the highest amount of oils that provide flavor and aroma. Pick herbs early in the morning after the dew has evaporated but before it gets too hot. Handle them carefully so the leaves are not bruised or damaged. Rinse herbs under cool, running water and gently shake or pat dry. Remove leaves that are damaged or so dirty that they cannot be cleaned. Imperfect stems or leaves also should be discarded.



#### *Methods for drying herbs*

**Dehydrator:** A dehydrator often gives the best results because the drying temperature can be controlled and also because the air circulation helps the herbs dry evenly. Preheat the dehydrator to 95 and 115 degrees F. In humid areas, which include much of Texas, set the temperature to 125 degrees. Place the rinsed herbs on a single layer on the dehydrator tray and dry for 1 to 4 hours. Actual drying time will depend on the amount of the herb being dried, the humidity, and the moisture content of the herb so check them periodically. For more detailed information on using the dehydrator, check the owner's manual.

**Air drying:** Herbs can be dried by hanging them in a well-ventilated room, attic, or screen-in porch. Tie sturdy herbs like rosemary, sage, or thyme in small bundles and hang to dry. They can be dried outside but the color and flavor will be better if dried indoors. Tender herbs like basil, mint, or lemon balm have high water content and will mold easily if the drying process takes too long. For these herbs, gather into bundles and place in a paper bag with holes. The holes allow proper air circulation. Close the top of



the bag with string or a rubber band and hang to dry. Leaves or seeds that fall off the herbs while drying will be caught in the bag. Check herbs periodically until drying is complete. If you live in an area of high humidity, you may want to consider oven drying.

*Oven drying:* The oven is a good choice for drying herbs with leaves that are easily removed from the stem such as oregano, mint, sage, or bay leaves. Remove leaves from the washed herbs and place them in a single layer on a paper towel. Make sure the leaves do not touch one another. Cover the leaves with another paper towel. Place the herbs in the oven overnight to dry. **Do not turn on the oven.** The heat needed to dry the oven will come from the oven light (if you have an electric oven) or the pilot light if your oven is heated using gas. Up to five layers can be dried at one time but this may depend on the humidity of your kitchen. Check the herbs until drying is complete.

*Microwave oven:* When small amounts of herbs need to be dried, the microwave is another option. However, if not done correctly the herbs will be cooked during the drying process. Because microwave ovens vary, always check the owner's manual before you dry any herbs.

### ***How do I know when my herbs are dried?***

Herbs are sufficiently dried when the leaves are crispy and crumble. Stems will break when bent.

### ***Storing and using dried herbs***

Once dried, place the herbs in an airtight container and store in a cool, dry, and dark place. Recommended containers include glass canning jars, freezer bags, and airtight plastic containers. Like other foods dried at home, dried herbs will keep up to a year if stored properly.

Keep in mind that dried herbs are several times stronger than those which are fresh. To substitute dried herbs for fresh ones, use 1/4 to 1/3 of the amount needed. For example, if a recipe calls for a tablespoon of fresh oregano, use 1 teaspoon of dried.



Reference: *So Easy to Preserve*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, 2006.

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