

Healthy Cooking with Fresh Herbs

Whether you plant them or pick them up at the grocery store or farmers' market, adding fresh herbs is a quick way to transform *ordinary* meals into *extraordinary* meals. Besides helping flavor foods when cutting back on salt, fat and sugar, herbs may offer additional benefits of their own. Researchers are finding many culinary herbs (both fresh and dried) have antioxidants that may help protect against such diseases as cancer and heart disease.

If you've always thought you'd like to plant an herb garden, you'll find information on how to do that at the end of this article. Take some thyme (pun intended!) to cook with fresh herbs. Here are some tips to help you enjoy the flavor and health benefits of fresh herbs in your cooking.

When to Pick or Purchase Herbs

Purchase herbs close to the time you plan to use them. When growing herbs in your own garden the ideal time for picking is in the morning after the dew has dried, but before the sun gets hot. This helps ensure the best flavor and storage quality.

How to Store Fresh Herbs

Fresh herbs can be stored in an open or a perforated plastic bag in your refrigerator crisper drawer for a few days. If you don't have access to commercial perforated bags, use a sharp object to make several small holes in a regular plastic bag.

How to Wash Herbs

Wash herbs when you are ready to use them. Wash smaller amounts of herbs thoroughly under running water. Shake off moisture or spin dry in a salad spinner. Pat off any remaining moisture with clean paper towels.

If you're washing a larger amount of herbs at one time, treat them as you would salad greens. Place in a clean sink or deep bowl filled with cold water and swish around. Lift from the water and transfer to another bowl so dirt and grit remain in the water. Pour out the water and repeat the washing process in clean water until dirt and grit are gone and the water is clear.

Note: If you plan to harvest a large amount of herbs from a home garden, consider washing them down with a hose the day before to help remove any large particles of dirt or grit that might be on the leaves

How to Prepare Herbs for Cooking

For most recipes, unless otherwise directed, mince herbs into tiny pieces. Chop with a chef's knife on a cutting board or snip with a kitchen scissors. To speed cutting with scissors, cut herbs coarsely into a small bowl or cup and snip back and forth with your scissors. Some recipes may direct you to cut large leaves, such as basil, "chiffonnade-style" or into thin strips. An easy way to do this is to stack several leaves (about 3 to 5), roll into a tight roll, then cut into thin (1/16 to 1/8 inch) strips with a sharp knife.

While some recipes call for a sprig or sprigs of herbs, normally the part of the herb you harvest will be the leaves. For herbs with sturdier stems, such as marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage and thyme, you can strip off the leaves by running your fingers down the stem from top to bottom. With small-leaved plants such as thyme, you can use both leaves and stems for cooking early in the season. Later in the season, as the stems become tougher, use just the leaves. For herbs with tender stems, such as parsley and cilantro, it's OK if you snip some of the stem in with the leaves when you're cutting these herbs.

Be careful if using a food processor to cut herbs — it's easy to turn them to a paste rather than tiny pieces.

When Substituting Fresh Herbs for Dried Herbs

A general guideline when using fresh herbs in a recipe is to use 3 times as much as you would use of a dried herb. When substituting, you'll often be more successful substituting fresh herbs for dried herbs, rather than the other way around. For example, think potato salad with fresh vs. dried parsley!

When to Add Herbs During Food Preparation

Unlike dried herbs, fresh herbs are usually added toward the end in cooked dishes to preserve their flavor. Add the more delicate herbs — basil, chives, cilantro, dill leaves, parsley, marjoram and mint — a minute or two before the end of cooking or sprinkle them on the food before it's served. The less delicate herbs, such as dill seeds, oregano, rosemary, tarragon and thyme, can be added about the last 20 minutes of cooking. Obviously, for some foods, such as breads, batters, etc., you'll need to add herbs at the beginning of the cooking process.

Fresh herbs can be added to refrigerated cold foods several hours before serving. Allow time (at least a couple of hours, if possible) for cold foods with herbs to chill helps the flavors to blend.

Freezing Herbs

Several books and articles on herbs recommend freezing as an easy way to preserve herbs. Recommendations vary on the best way to freeze herbs, how long frozen herbs will maintain a satisfactory flavor and which herbs will freeze well. Be aware that when herbs are frozen, they become limp, lose their color and are best used in cooked foods. The most conservative guidelines for how long herbs will maintain their quality frozen range from two to six months. Here are three possible ways to freeze herbs:

- 1) The easiest method and one recommended on the National Center for Home Food Preservation Web site www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/freeze/herbs.html states: “Wash, drain and pat dry with paper towels. Wrap a few sprigs or leaves in freezer wrap and place in a freezer bag. Seal and freeze. These can be chopped and used in cooked dishes. These usually are not suitable for garnish, as the frozen product becomes limp when it thaws.”
- 2) Another method recommends washing herbs, cutting them into tiny pieces and then filling the sections of an ice cube tray about half full with herbs. Cover herbs with cold water and freeze until solid. Transfer frozen cubes to a freezer bag and squish out as much air as possible. Drop them into soups, stews and sauces as needed. Be aware herbs may stain plastic ice cube trays.
- 3) To save time chopping herbs into tiny pieces, you might try making a “slurry.” Simply puree your washed herbs in a blender with a small amount of water. Pour into ice cube trays and freeze until solid. Transfer to a freezer bag and add to foods, as desired.

Regardless of how you freeze herbs, label them as to type (they tend to look the same frozen) and the date frozen. If you freeze quite a few herbs, it may be easier to find them in your freezer if you store the individual packages together in one large container.

Which method works best? Experiment for yourself with small amounts of herbs at the beginning of the season and sample your results a month or so later. Determine your personal preference before committing a lot of time (and freezer space!) to frozen herbs.

Herb/Food Combinations

Here are some ideas to help you start combining fresh herbs with your foods.

BASIL — a natural snipped in with tomatoes; terrific in fresh pesto; other possibilities include pasta sauce, peas, zucchini

CHIVES — dips, potatoes, tomatoes

CILANTRO — Mexican, Asian and Caribbean cooking; salsas, tomatoes

DILL — carrots, cottage cheese, fish, green beans, potatoes, tomatoes

MINT — carrots, fruit salads, parsley, peas, tea

OREGANO — peppers, tomatoes

PARSLEY — The curly leaf is the most common, but the flat-leaf or Italian parsley is more strongly flavored and often preferred for cooking. Natural for parsley include potato salad.

ROSEMARY — chicken, fish, lamb, pork, roasted potatoes, soups, stews, tomatoes

SAGE — poultry seasoning, stuffings

TARRAGON — chicken, eggs, fish

THYME — eggs, lima beans, potatoes, poultry, summer squash, tomatoes

WINTER SAVORY — dried bean dishes, stews

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