

HERBS BEYOND THE GARDEN

Hopefully, you took time during the summer to enjoy your herb gardens' fresh bounty, either in your favourite culinary creations or as garnishes and perhaps even added some to summer bouquets and arrangements. Dill makes a wonderful, aromatic 'fern like' addition for tall vases. Try garlic scapes for a creative and artistic flare or perhaps, sprigs of rosemary, basil and thyme along with Cornflowers or Calendula flowers in a hollowed out coloured pepper for a fun and edible centre piece!

Summer may be officially over, but there are still plenty of ways to enjoy your herbs all winter long! Herb Oils and Vinegars, Pesto, seasoning blends, mustards, jellies, teas, bath blends, skin care products, pot pouris, wreaths and other decorations, even home remedies. Here are some ideas and tips to help you get the most from your garden so that you will be able to enjoy your herbs all year long!

HARVESTING: The best time to harvest your herbs is in the morning after the dew has dried off but before the mid-day heat has evaporated the essential oils or active constituents of the plant. To harvest herbs like basil, tarragon, sage and thyme, cut using scissors or sharp cutters, the top third of the plant. This not only provides you with the fresh tender parts, but also ensures that you do not cut too much and kill the plant, it also promotes busy growth. For herbs such as bergamot, yarrow or catnip, cut all of the plant above the ground when flowering begins-often with herbs like catnip or yarrow you will get a second crop of leaves in one season. If harvesting calendula, chamomile or other flowers, pick the flowers as they first open in dry conditions. For roots such as Echinacea or burdock lift roots with a shovel in fall after the foliage has died off, wash well then cut into pieces before drying-they become hard as rock once dried.

DRYING: Generally, herbs need to be dried in a warm dry location with good air circulation and out of direct sunlight. An attic, shed or garage work well for this. Most herbs will dry within a weeks' time in favourable conditions. Roots often require longer or may have to be dried in the oven set on low and will usually dry in 1 to 3 hours. Make sure to check them regularly so as not to over dry.

When dry the plant material should be brittle but still have good colour. I generally break the stem and if it snaps easily, then your herbs are dry. Flowers to be dried should be laid out in a single layer and will usually dry in about 5 days. You can hang your herbs to dry by tying small bunches-large bunches can get mold in the centre, secure with elastic bands-these will shrink with the plant material, and hand with a string or clothespin. If drying leaves or flowers use a drying rack-easily made using a wooden frame or find an old window frame, and lined with nylon (not metal-it will rust) mesh. Do not pack too thickly and you may have to move the herbs around daily to ensure proper drying. Cardboard boxes also work well, but again move the plant material around frequently. Remember to label, herbs can look quite different when dry.

STORING: If possible store herbs as whole as possible in glass jars with tight fitting lids, check the next day for any signs of moisture in the container and if present, remove from jar and dry longer. Cardboard boxes and brown bags also work well for storing, especially when you have large pieces or a large amount. Label and date containers and store in a cool, dry, dark location. Dried herbs generally have a storage period of one year. Remember next year to throw any unused herbs in the compost pile.....or try steeping like a very strong tea, allow to cool, and use as a natural fertilizer for your plants. Chamomile is known as the 'Plant Doctor' and when used as a tea (make sure it is cool) and sprayed on young seedlings can help prevent them from damping off!

FREEZING: Some herbs such as basil, parsley and chives do not dry well, they lose much of their flavour and aroma on drying and are best stored frozen. You can freeze them in plastic freezer bags, making sure to get as much of the air out, as possible, before closing and placing them in your freezer. Remember to date and label the bag. Do not thaw before using just chop finely while frozen and add them to your soups, stews, sauces etc. An alternative method is to puree them in your blender or food processor and freeze in ice cube trays, removing the frozen cubes to freezer bags for storage. One cube is approx. 1 tablespoon and perfect for flavouring up your dishes!

OILS & VINEGARS: This is another great way to preserve your harvest. Vinegars are the easiest and probably one of the best known herbal products. To make culinary herb vinegars-place 1 cup of chopped fresh herbs into a sterilized glass jar at least 1 litre in size. Pour 2 cups of vinegar-red or white wine vinegar or rice wine vinegar-do not use regular white vinegar), cap tightly and place in a warm location for 2 to 3 weeks, shake daily. Then filter using a coffee filter or 3 layers of cheese cloth and pour into bottles and cap or cork, label and date clearly. You can add a fresh sprig of herb for decoration if you like. Vinegars will keep for up to 2 years.

For Oils use one half cup of fresh chopped herb to 2 cups of oil-olive, sunflower or safflower oil. Before capping add 2 tablespoons of wine vinegar, then cap tightly. Place in a warm location, but not in direct sunlight, for 2 weeks, shake daily. Then, filter, being careful to stop before the vinegar\water layer, through 3 layers of cheese cloth. Fill clean bottles and cap securely, label and date. *Do not add sprigs of herbs to oils due to the potential of bacterial growth.

Medicated Oils and medicinal vinegars are usually made with a higher concentration of herbs and you should consult a reliable source for directions.

Pesto: Traditionally made with basil, but use your imagination and try some other fresh herbs like tarragon, cilantro, thyme or a combination of herbs. The basic recipe is to chop 2 cloves of garlic in a food processor or blender, add the chopped herbs, ½ cup pine nuts or other nuts\seeds and ¾ cup olive oil. Process for 30-45 seconds, then, with the motor running add ¾ cup grated cheese (parmesan, Romano etc.). Blend until well mixed, and spoon into sterilized jars (refrigerate-for up to 3 weeks) or freeze. The ice cube idea works well for this too!

Mustards and Jellies: Use either fresh or dried herbs for these great condiments! Perfect for gifts too! For mustards either make your own mustard using your favourite recipe-generally a mild mustard is best for achieving a good herb flavour, or use an already prepared mustard like a mild Dijon. To the mustard add ½ cup fresh or 3 T. Dried herbs to 2 cups of mustard. Place in sterilized jars, cap, label and date. Mustards should sit for about a week for flavours to blend. For Jellies use a standard jelly recipe and substitute the juice portion with a strong herbal infusion. To make a strong infusion place herbs in a pot and just cover with water or suitable fruit juice, bring to just below boiling over medium heat. Remove from heat and cover. Allow to steep for at least 20 minutes then strain through coffee filter or cheesecloth. Discard herbs in the compost.

Seasoning, Herb Salt & Sugar Blends: Using your quality dried herbs you can mix up some excellent and useful blends. Seasoning blends are a great way to cut back on the salt in ones diet and can turn an ordinary dish into something extraordinary. Herbs used for seasoning blends should be rubbed down or powdered. It is best to process herbs for this as needed, so only make up as much as you are going to use in the next couple of weeks. Once, cut finely herbs lose their flavour and aroma quickly. You can do this by hand by stripping the leaves off the stems when dry or you can remove any tough stems and cut in pieces then grind in a blender or coffee grinder. Shake through a sieve to remove any tough stems or large pieces. Check herb cookbooks for some ideas on blends, everything from blends for salad dressings, marinating, soup blends or tabletop seasoning. Herb salts are another idea and great for salads-mix equal amounts of finely ground herbs with sea salt and blend well. For Herb Sugars use herbs such as mints-spearmint, peppermint, lemon mint. Combine ¼ cup of finely ground herbs with 1 cup of powdered\granulated white sugar. To use this in your baking, substitute the required sugar ingredient with ½ as much of the mint sugar.

Tea Blends: Nothing beats those winter blues like a cup of herbal tea made from last seasons dried herbs while browsing through the new seed catalogue! For herbal teas the more whole the leaves and flowers the better the quality. Which herbs to use are a matter of taste but some to try include any of the mints, chamomile, bergamot, lemon balm, lemon verbena, stinging nettle, marshmallow, anise hyssop to mention a few. Just remove any tough stems and blend together well. If using seeds like anise or fennel, grind in a coffee grinder before adding to your blend. Store in a glass jar, cap, label and date. To make tea pour 1 cup of boiling water over 1 gently crushed teaspoon of blend, cover and steep for 5 to 10 minutes. If you want it stronger, use more herbs, do not steep longer. Strain out herbs, relax and think spring!

SKIN & BATH CARE PRODUCTS: Using your dried herbs and other herbal techniques like infusions, medicated oils & vinegars and tinctures you can create some fabulous all natural products for your skin, bath and hair. There are many possibilities and I recommend a book called 'Skin Deep' by Margaret Dinsdale or Kettleby's Bath & Skin Care Manual for recipes and ideas.

POT POURIS & WREATHS\DECORATIONS: These can be made purely for scent and pleasure or can have a purpose such as moth repellents and air fresheners. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination. Workshops are a great way to learn the basic techniques.

HOME REMEDIES: These include infusions, tinctures, tonics, capsules, ointments, creams, poultices and syrups. There are a number of books available and I recommend taking courses and workshops. Always, use a reliable reference when preparing these products as it is important to understand the properties of herbs to make a safe and effective remedy.

Whether your skill and interest lie in the kitchen, with a sewing machine or needle and thread or are interested in the health benefits of herbs the possibilities seem limitless and the satisfaction obtained from growing, processing and using your finished product is best of all!

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