



# Herbs: Growing & Harvesting

## How to Grow Herbs

Herbs love sunshine, thriving with six to eight hours of daily light, even in foggy coastal areas (sun does shine through the fog!). To set your herb garden up for success, ensure well-drained soil by adding organic matter or using raised beds. A complete fertilizer will help your herbs grow strong and healthy.

Water herbs consistently until they're established. Most will become relatively drought-tolerant, though basil, chives, mint, and parsley prefer steady moisture. Herbs are adaptable and will fit beautifully into garden beds, borders, or pots near your kitchen.

Many herbs attract beneficial insects when flowering. Regular pruning keeps plants productive, and growing multiple specimens of your favorite herbs ensures a steady, fresh supply for cooking.

## Harvesting & Storage

Gather herbs when they have the optimum amount of essential oils - when they're just about to flower and the buds have formed but not opened. Harvest early on a dry day that has been preceded by at least two sunny days. An exception to this rule is mint which has the most oil in the leaves when the plant is in full bloom.

When gathering a large quantity of herbs, use an open basket or container that allows good air circulation, not plastic bags. You can prune perennial herbs by cutting them back to about half their height. For annual herbs at the end of the season, cut them down to a few inches or remove them completely. Wash the plants in cool water immediately after gathering and spread on towels, then pat dry. To store in the refrigerator, place between damp paper towels and put in plastic bags.

## Drying

Small-leaf herbs like thyme, rosemary, and oregano can be dried on the stem. Tie small bunches in a brown paper bag and hang to dry. When leaves crumble easily, store in a clean, dark jar.

For some herbs, you must strip the leaves from the stems before drying; these include basil, dill, lemon balm, lovage, mint, sage, lemon verbena and tarragon. Place the herbs on a cookie sheet and dry in an oven at 125 degrees F for a few minutes before placing in an air-tight container.

## Harvest

Gauging the right time to harvest is important. Dug too soon, the skins will not have formed around each clove. Each year the timing is a little different, so rather than watch the calendar, observe the plants. As the bulbs mature, the leaves brown off. When there are still 5 to 6 green leaves remaining on the plant, dig and examine a plant every few days to check the bulb. (Incidentally, immature bulbs that haven't fully developed skins around their cloves can be chopped up and used like onions.)

In very good garlic ground (very fluffy soil) the plants can be pulled by hand, but it is usually better to loosen the soil first with a digging fork. Immediately, and very gently, brush off the soil from around the roots. Drying is the essential part of curing the bulbs, so don't wash them in water. Move the newly dug garlic out of direct sunlight.

## Freezing

After cleaning, spread in a single layer on a pan and put them in the freezer. After they are frozen, place herbs in plastic bags, push all the air out of the bags. Label and date them, and keep in the freezer. Herbs that freeze well are dill, mint, sorrel, sage, chervil, oregano, thyme, borage, summer and winter savory, chives and lemongrass. (Chop chives and lemongrass before you freeze them.)

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## Cooking with Herbs

Some herbs can be made into herb butters. The basic mix is ½ cup fresh chopped herbs to ½ cup softened butter, after mixing double roll in foil, label and date. This compound butter can be kept in the freezer for up to two months. Thaw and use at room temperature. The herbs listed above can be used this way in addition to basil, lemon verbena, and scented geranium leaves.

**1** Another way to use herbs is to make a paste by mixing 1/3 cup of oil with 2 cups of herbs in a blender until smooth. The paste freezes beautifully in sealed jars. It will also keep for about a week in the refrigerator. Herbs that are good candidates for grinding into pastes include basil, chervil, cilantro, coriander, dill, fennel, marjoram, mint, parsley, rosemary, sage, savory, and tarragon.

**2** Herbs can also be frozen to make decorative ice cubes for party drinks. Boil the water first to make it clear, once it has cooled fill the bottom of the tray with the boiled water and freeze. Arrange the herbs you plan to freeze, then continue adding water until the tray is filled.



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