



Cut & Dried: Harvesting & Preserving Herbs
Pauline Atkins
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

No garden space is too small to plant an herb garden. From a tiny, sunny window, or an outside kitchen garden in a pot or a basket, to a lush in-ground raised bed, anyone can grow, nurture, and harvest herbs for their personal use. A cook's garden of culinary herbs could include the following plants:

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*), dill (*Anethum graveolens*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*), sage (*Salvia officinalis*), or thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*).

Preserving herbs is easy, by either the cut-and-dry process or freezing, and requires no special equipment. Dried herbs from your garden offer the next-best thing to fresh. Most herb plants provide two harvests, summer and fall. By late summer to early fall, plants decline. This is a good time to begin your last harvest and preserve your herbs for the winter months. If you follow a few simple guidelines, you can enjoy the benefits of each herb's individual characteristics -- their flavor, scent, and color -- year-round.

Always harvest herbs in the morning, after dew has dried, but before sunshine bakes out the plants' essential oils, which is the source of their flavor and fragrance. If plants are dirty, gently rinse them with cool water, then shake off excess water.

Air drying is an easy way to preserve leafy herbs like sage, lemon balm and rosemary. Gather fresh-cut stems of loose bunches and wrap tightly with a rubber band or twine. Hang them upside down in a warm, dry, dark, airy place, such as your pantry. Herbs are ready for use when the leaves are crispy, in about a week or two. Place in the freezer for 48 hours to kill any insect eggs. Glass jars work well for storage; be sure to label them.

11-11-2020

Harvest seed-bearing herbs, which include dill, fennel and culinary lavender, before the seed heads begin to shatter. Cut the entire plant and slip stems, upside down, into a paper bag. As the plant dries, shake the bag, and the seeds will fall off to the bottom of the bag for harvest. Store them in an airtight, labeled container.

To preserve herbs with high water content, such as chives, basil & mint, another option would be to freeze them. There are two methods. The first would be to rinse the leaves and pat them dry. Place them flat on a cookie sheet and put them in the freezer for a few hours. Once frozen, transfer them to labeled freezer bags and store flat in the freezer for easy use. The other way would be to freeze fresh herbs like chives and parsley into ice cubes. Rinse and trim them to fit into plastic ice cube trays, top off with water and pop them into the freezer. Once frozen, transfer the cubes to labeled freezer bags. Thaw when needed and you have instant herbs!

There are few things more rewarding than growing your own herbs. Their fragrance and taste will enrich your life as well as your meals!

Join us for an on-line public education class on Shade Gardening on November 14th from 9 am to 10 am (part 2). Check mgeldorado.ucanr.edu to catch part 1. Learn how shade gardens add cool beauty, texture and color to your landscape. Join this talented team of Master Gardeners to learn what plants thrive in all kinds of shade --- dappled to deep. Register in advance for this class: https://ucanr.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJYlf-uqrT8sGN2ooAuY-JwKF7_wU0stauup. After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the class.

Due to the pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future continue to be limited. Please see our calendar of events for learning opportunities. We realize our public classes are valued by county residents and we are doing our best to provide virtual learning opportunities.

Want more information about preserving fresh herbs? Contact the UC Master Food Preservers at 530-621-5506 or use the "Ask a Master Food Preserver" option on our website: <http://ucanr.edu/edmf>.

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.