

# Horticulture Diagnostic Laboratory



Cornell University  
Cooperative Extension  
of Suffolk County  
[www.ccesuffolk.org](http://www.ccesuffolk.org)

Extension Education Center  
423 Griffing Ave, Ste 100  
Riverhead, NY 11901-3071  
631-727-4126

Bayard Cutting Arboretum  
Montauk Hwy  
Great River, NY 11739  
631-581-4223



## Using Home-Grown Herbs with Your Vegetables

**Drying:** As the herbs begin to blossom, pick tender stems containing mature succulent leaves. Wash stems and leaves in cold water, drain and dry on paper towels. Tie herbs in small bunches and hang upside down in a warm, dry ventilated room, away from direct sunlight. When thoroughly dry, remove leaves from stems and store in the dark in glass jars or plastic bags. Tender leaf herbs such as basil, tarragon and mint, will mold if not dried quickly.

Try hanging the tender-leaf herbs or those with seeds inside paper bags to dry. Tear holes in the sides of the bag. Suspend a small handful (large amounts will mold) of herbs in a bag and close the top with a rubber band. Place where air currents will circulate through the bag. Any leaves and seeds that fall off will be caught in the bottom of the bags.

When herb leaves or seeds are dry you can clean them by separating them from stems. Pack in suitable containers to prevent loss of the essential oils that give the herbs their delicate flavor. Storage in glass, metal or plastic freezer bags in paper boxes will preserve the odor and flavor.

Another method, especially nice for mint, sage or bay leaf, is to dry the leaves separately. Remove the best leaves from the stems. Lay each leaf on a paper towel and without allowing leaves to touch, cover with another towel and layer of leaves. Five layers may be dried at one time using this method. Dry in a very cool oven. The oven light of an electric range or the pilot light of a gas range furnishes enough heat for overnight drying. Leaves dry flat and retain a good color. Package the herbs promptly in moisture-vapor-proof containers. Protect from light to retain color.

**Drying In A Microwave Oven:** The drying of herbs in a home microwave oven has been questioned because it is not known what effect such a very small food load may have on the magnetron tube in the oven. In theory the light load and limited moisture of the herbs would not provide enough moisture for correct function of the oven. Follow directions for your particular make. Small, occasional harvests should present few problems if a small container of water is placed in the appliance when the drying is done.

**Freezing:** Harvest and wash as above, then dry thoroughly. Pack in small plastic bags and freeze. Another method is to place small amounts of the herb in ice-cube trays, and cover with water and freeze. When frozen, remove from trays and store in plastic bags in the freezer.

Frozen herbs will keep for at least six months, but are not suitable for use as garnish. Chop frozen herbs as soon as they come out of the freezer.

## Vinegar, Oils & Butters

**Vinegar:** The preparation of flavored vinegar involves the addition of one or several culinary herbs to commercially bottled vinegar. Any type of vinegar may be used, depending on personal preference.

The procedure is to heat vinegar in an enamel pan and pour it into a bottle. (Do not let the vinegar boil.) Add one herb or a combination of herbs to taste. See chart for herb blends. Let the mixture set for two weeks before using. Store the mixture in tightly capped bottles.

**Oils:** There are growing concerns that herbs (and garlic) stored in oil that is not acidified and not refrigerated may carry a risk of botulism. Commercial garlic-in-oil products usually contain acidifying agents such as

phosphoric or citric acid. In the home, it is best to make herb-oil mixtures fresh as needed for each use and not to store them, especially do not store at room temperatures.

**Basic herb butter:** ¼ pound butter or margarine, one to three tablespoons dried herbs or two to six tablespoons fresh herbs, ½ teaspoon lemon juice and pepper. Combine ingredients and mix until fluffy. Pack in covered container and refrigerate. Any of the culinary herbs and spices may be used.

### **Cooking With Herbs**

Herbs can provide creative, tasteful alternatives to salt for flavoring foods. Through the skillful use of herbs and spices, imaginative flavors can be created and simple foods made into gourmet delights.

Herbs and spices differ only in that herbs tend to be plants grown in temperate areas while spices grow in tropical regions.

There are no strict limits to the use of herbs. A good general rule is not to mix two very strong herbs together, but rather one strong and one or more milder flavors to complement both the stronger herb and the food.

***Here are some tips for cooking with herbs and spices:***

\*In general, the weaker the flavor of the main staple item, the lower the level of added seasoning required to achieve a satisfactory balance of flavor in the end product.

\*Dried herbs are stronger than fresh, and powdered herbs are stronger than crumbled. A useful formula is: ¼ teaspoon powdered herbs = ¾ to 1 teaspoon crumbled = 2 teaspoons fresh.

\*Leaves should be chopped very fine because the more cut surface exposed, the more flavor will be absorbed.

\*Be conservative in the amount of an herb used until you're familiar with its strength. The aromatic oils can be strong and objectionable if too much is used.

\*The flavoring of herbs is lost by extended cooking. Add herbs to soups or stews about 45 minutes before completing the cooking. But for cold foods such as dips, cheese, vegetables and dressings, herbs should be added several hours or overnight before using.

\*Beware when purchasing herbal salt blends. Many are merely herbs added to salt. Read the ingredients carefully or just blend your own combinations.

### **Strength of Herbs**

***Strong or Dominant Flavors:*** These should be used with care since their flavors stand out—approximately one teaspoon for six servings. They include bay, cardamom, curry, ginger, hot peppers, mustard, pepper (black), rosemary and sage.

***Medium Flavors:*** A moderate amount of these is recommended—one to two teaspoons for six servings. They are basil, celery seed and leaves, cumin, dill, fennel, French tarragon, garlic, marjoram, mint, oregano, savory (winter and summer), thyme and turmeric.

***Delicate Flavors:*** These may be used in large quantities and combine well with most other herbs and spices. This group includes burnet, chervil, chives, and parsley.

### **Herb Blends**

***Following are some suggested herb blends:***

**Egg herbs:** basil, dill weed (leaves), garlic, parsley

**Fish herbs:** basil, bay leaf (crumbled), French tarragon, lemon thyme, parsley (options: fennel, sage savory)

**Poultry herbs:** lovage, marjoram (two parts), sage (three parts)

**Salad herbs:** basil, lovage, parsley, French tarragon

**Tomato sauce herbs:** basil (two parts), bay leaf, marjoram, oregano, parsley (options: celery leaves, cloves)

**Vegetable herbs:** basil, parsley, savory

*Some suggested herb blends: (continued)*

**Italian blend:** basil, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage. Savory, thyme

**Barbecue blend:** cumin, garlic, hot pepper, oregano

*French herbal combinations:*

**\*Fines herbes:** parsley, chervil, chives, French tarragon (sometimes adding a small amount of basil, fennel, oregano, sage or saffron)

**\*Bouquet garni mixtures:** bay, parsley (two parts), thyme. The herbs may be wrapped in cheesecloth or the parsley wrapped around the thyme and bay leaf.

### Herbs and Their Uses

**Annual Herbs:** An annual is a plant in which the entire life cycle is completed in a single growing season.

| Herb          | Part Used                | Use                                                        |
|---------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Basil, Lemon  | leaves - fresh and dried | tomato dishes, soups, meats, peas, green beans, cucumbers, |
| Basil, Opal   |                          | zucchini, shellfish, lobster, pasta sauce                  |
| Basil, Sweet  |                          |                                                            |
| Chamomile     | blossoms                 | soothing herbal tea, hair rinse, insect repellent          |
| Chervil       | leaves - fresh and dried | salads, soups, fish, egg, meat and cheese dishes           |
| Summer Savory | leaves - fresh and dried | all kinds of meat, fowl, green salads                      |

**Biennial Herbs:** A biennial is a plant that normally requires two growing season to complete the life cycle. Only vegetative growth occurs the first year; flowering and fruiting occur in the second year.

| Herb    | Part Used                | Use                                                       |
|---------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Parsley | leaves - fresh and dried | add to foods whenever possible, high in vitamin C content |

**Perennial Herbs:** A perennial is a woody or herbaceous plant living from year to year, not dying after once flowering.

| Herb              | Part Used                | Use                                                                                              |
|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Chives            | fresh tops               | mild onion substitute, dips, salads, spreads, sauces<br>vegetables                               |
| Horehound         | leaves & stems           | candy, tea for colds                                                                             |
| Hyssop            | flowers & tops           | fish, lamb, soups, stews                                                                         |
| Lavender          | flowers & leaves         | sachets, potpourri, repels moths, flies, and mosquitoes                                          |
| Lemon Balm        | fresh leaves             | add to hot or iced teas, fruit cups, salads, potpourri                                           |
| Lovage            | all parts                | celery flavor - stalks in soups, salads, fish & poultry; seeds<br>in biscuits; leaves in tea     |
| Catnip            | leaves - fresh and dried | fruit salads, lamb, cold drinks, tea (helps indigestion),<br>candies; cook with peas and carrots |
| Egyptian Mint     |                          |                                                                                                  |
| Emerald-Gold Mint |                          |                                                                                                  |
| Orange Mint       |                          |                                                                                                  |
| Peppermint        |                          |                                                                                                  |
| Peppermint,       |                          |                                                                                                  |
| Variegated        |                          |                                                                                                  |
| Spearmint         |                          |                                                                                                  |
| Spearmint,        |                          |                                                                                                  |

Variegated

Rosemary, prostrate leaves - fresh and dried lamb, pork, chicken, fish, vegetable dishes, fruit salads and juices, stews, soups

**Herb**

**Part Used**

**Use**

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Sage pork, leaves - fresh and dried fish, legumes, game, cheese, tomatoes, spinach, onions, Sage, Pineapple eggplant, tea, butters  
Sage, Purple

Sage, Variegated

Winter Savory leaves - fresh and dried all kinds of meat, poultry, green salads, beans

Tarragon French leaves - fresh and dried vinegar, fish, lamb, poultry, salads, sauces, seafood, pickles, preserves, cabbage

Thyme, Lemon leaves - fresh and dried sausages, pork, salads, seafood, veal, poultry, vegetables

Thyme, Oregano

Thyme, Winter

Thyme, Gold-lemon

**References:** Home Drying of Foods, Cornell Information Bulletin 120; Do yourself a Flavor, FDA Consumer, April 1984

Compiled in part by: Sue Thompson Department of Vegetable Crops Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

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