
service in ACTION

Growing, preserving and using herbs

Pat Kendall¹

no. 9.335

Quick Facts

Herbs grow in temperate areas of the world.
The leaves and seeds of herbs are used to flavor foods.
The flavor of herbs is derived from oils in the cell walls of the plants.
When growing herbs in Colorado, supplemental watering is necessary.
Perennial herbs can be started from young plants.
Annual herbs can be started from seeds.
Dried herbs can be stored effectively up to one year.

Using Herbs

For best results, use herbs to compliment, not disguise the flavor of food. Generally, one-fourth teaspoon of dried herbs per four servings is adequate. To substitute one form for another, these amounts may be used as guidelines: one-fourth teaspoon powdered, one teaspoon dried; one tablespoon chopped fresh herb.

Cooked foods are best if herbs are added during the last part of cooking. Herb flavors in uncooked foods such as salad dressings, dips and fruits need time to blend flavors, so should be added as long before serving as possible. Whole herbs wrapped in a cheesecloth bag before adding to cooked dishes can be easily removed before serving.

Herbs grow in temperate areas of the world. In contrast, spices grow only in tropical zones. The leaves and seeds of herbs often are used as complements to food dishes. Herb leaves can be used fresh or preserved for later use by drying and freezing. Seeds usually are dried before use.

The flavor of herbs is derived from oils in the cell walls of the plants. Chopping or grinding breaks the cell walls and releases the flavor. Heat often increases the rate at which some herbs release their flavors.

This information provided by:

1. Colorado State University Cooperative Extension foods and nutrition specialist and professor, food science and human nutrition. 8/94. ©Colorado State University Cooperative Extension. 1994. For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension office.

Growing and Harvesting Herbs

A few different herb plants in the garden generally will serve the needs of an average family. Supplemental watering of the plants is necessary in Colorado. Protect the crown of overwintering perennials with a loose covering of straw and water occasionally to reduce the possibility of winterkill.

See "Selected herbs" for individual herb growing tips.

Perennial herbs (those that grow for more than one season) such as sweet marjoram, parsley, mint, sage, thyme and chives can be started from young plants. Parsley can be started from seed. Some perennial herbs may winterkill in harsh weather and may need to be replanted each year as annuals.

Annual herbs (those that complete their life cycle in one year) can be started from seeds. Seed for such herbs as coriander, chervil, chives, oregano, basil and dill can be purchased from national seed firms catering to the home gardener. Seeds also are available from garden supply stores.

Many herbs can be successfully grown in large containers on a deck or patio. Clay, wooden or ceramic pots serve the purpose well. Herbs planted in these containers often can be moved indoors before the first frost. If necessary they can be transplanted to smaller containers for indoor growth.

The best time for gathering herbs for harvest is in the morning of a dry day, just after the dew has evaporated. Label all herbs before they are dried because they tend to be similar in appearance after they have dried.

Storing Herbs

Dried herbs can be stored effectively up to year. Their strength can be judged by their aroma. Dried herbs can be stored whole or crushed, but whole herbs retain their flavor longer. To assure optimum quality, store in rigid containers with airtight seals. Choose ceramic jars or darkened glass containers to help protect the herbs against light deterioration. Make sure herb leaves are completely dry to prevent mold growth during storage. Label all storage containers with name of herb and date and store in cool, dry place.

Quick frozen herbs will keep up to two years in the freezer if well wrapped. Seal in airtight plastic bags and label with name of product and date.

Selected Herbs

Anise (*Pimpinella anisum*)--seeds.

Characteristics. Annual. Grown for small oval, greenish brown seeds with licorice-like flavor. Used in cookies, candies, pickles, beverages, breads and rolls.

Growing. Plant fresh seeds in moderately rich, well-drained soil. Likes sunshine. Space mature plants 6 to 8 inches.

Preserving. Cut stems of seed heads after seeds have developed. Dry by placing on frames of stretched cheesecloth in a cool shed or room. When dry, remove seeds and store in airtight container.



Anise.

Basil, sweet (*Ocimum basilicum*)--leaves

Characteristics. Annual. Good border plant. Dark green leaves have sweet flavor with wild pungency. Excellent with tomatoes, cheese, stews, meats, soups and green salads.

Growing. Plant seeds in well-drained, medium rich soil. Likes sunny, sheltered spot. Space mature plants 12 inches. Can be grown in containers. Plant in rich soil and clip to first pair of leaves from base.

Preserving. Cut stems 6 to 8 inches above ground when plant starts to flower. Hang stems upside down in warm, dry, dark room. Individual leaves may be dried on cheesecloth or netting screens. When dry, leaves crumble easily. Store whole or crushed in airtight containers. To freeze, wash leaves, pack in ice cube trays and fill with water. When frozen, remove cubes and store in plastic bags. Defrost in a strainer and use as fresh.



Basil.

Bay (*Laurus nobilis*)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial. Must be moved inside to survive winter in Colorado. The leaf of this evergreen shrub is aromatic, with a sweetish odor and pungent taste. A classic ingredient in the French bouquet, bay leaves also are used in sauces, pickling, stews, and with meats and potatoes.

Growing. Plant in well-drained soil, sheltered from winds. Propagate from 4-inch cuttings. Clip frequently to maintain a manageable



Bay.

size. May be transferred to large containers for indoor or outdoor growth.

Preserving. Pick individual leaves to use fresh or preserve. Dry leaves on screens in cool, dry, airy, shaded place. When dry, pack in airtight containers. To freeze, see basil.

Caraway (*Carum carvi*)--seeds

Characteristics. Biennial. Feathery foliage and creamy white flowers. Grown for its hard, brown, savory seeds. Mostly used whole in rye breads, sauerkraut, cheeses, potato salads, meats and stews.



Caraway.

Growing. Plant seeds in light soil. If seeds are sown in fall, they will produce ripe seeds the next year. Thin seedlings to about 9 inches apart. Avoid transplanting due to long roots and tiny fibers.

Preserving. Cut plants to ground level when flowers and stalks turn brown. Hang in small bunches by stems in airy place over cloth- or paper-lined containers. Seeds will shake out easily when fully ripe. Store in airtight containers.

Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*)--leaves

Characteristics. Annual. Resembles a fine leaved parsley and fennel combined. Has a light licorice flavor with a wild taste of pepper. Gives delightful flavor to salads and salad dressings, meats, fish, soups, omelets and stews.



Chervil.

Growing. Plant seeds like basil, only provide for shade or partly shade. Avoid transplanting. Space mature plants 9 inches apart. May be grown in containers indoors or outdoors.

Preserving. Pick only young, fresh leaves to dry. To dry or freeze, see basil.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial. Attractive border plant. Similar to green onion, but milder and finer leaves. Used whenever light oniony flavor is desired in salads, dips, sauces, vegetables, soups, fish, etc.



Chives.

Growing. Plant bulbs or starter clumps in light, medium rich soil in

sunny place. Cut flower stalks to the ground after blooming. Divide clumps to thin every third spring. Space mature plants 5 inches. Transfer some clumps to grow in containers indoors or outdoors.

Preserving. Use leaves fresh by snipping off the tops with scissors. Chives lose their color and flavor on drying. To freeze, wash and chop finely, then continue method as for basil.

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*)--seeds

Characteristics. Annual. Delicate lacy foliage with pinkish-white flowers. May reach 20 to 30 inches in height. Produces small orange-flavored seeds that are used in cold cuts, curry powder, cakes, cookies, poultry dressings, French dressing and Scandinavian cooking.



Coriander.

Growing. Plant seeds in light, medium rich soil in sunny place. Avoid transplanting. Space mature plants 10 inches apart. If allowed, plant will reseed.

Preserving. Cut off seed heads and dry in an airy place on screens over cloth-lined container. When seed are dry, shake out of heads and store in air-tight containers. Flavor of seeds will improve if stored a month before using.

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)--seeds, leaves

Characteristics. Annual. Feathery foliage and flower umbels. Grows 2 to 3 feet tall. Seeds have slightly bitter taste and are used in soups, pickles, cheese dishes, breads, sauces, meats and fish. Dill weed has delicate bouquet: used to flavor fish sauces, salads, dips, potatoes and meats.



Dill.

Growing. Plant seeds in medium rich, sandy, well-drained soil in sunny spot. Plants need wind protection. Avoid transplanting; may be staked when 18 inches high. Thin seedlings to 12 inches. Do not plant near fennel or they may cross-pollinate.

Preserving. Cut young leaves and spread in a thin layer to dry until brittle. Crumble leaves and store in an airtight container. To collect seeds, cut flower umbel stalks or pull entire plant from ground. Hang upside down in a sunny place to dry. Shake seeds out when dry and store in airtight containers.

Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*)--stems, leaves, seeds

Characteristics. Annual that often reseeds itself. Bright green feathery foliage with yellow flowers. Produces yellowish brown seeds with sharp, sweet licorice like flavor. Leaves used as garnish or flavoring in sauces and salads. Seeds commonly used to flavor sausages, breads, salads, salad dressings, pickles, soups and sauces.



Fennel.

Growing. Plant seed in well-drained soil in sunny spot. Thin seedlings to 2 feet apart. Don't plant near dill, coriander or caraway - if you plan to save the seed to replant. Makes a good container plant indoors or outdoors when kept trimmed to 12 inches.

Preserving. Young stems can be used like celery. Pick young leaves to dry, as for basil. Cut off flower stems before seeds fall. Hang over a cloth in a warm, dry place until seeds can be shaken out. Store in airtight containers.

Marjoram, sweet (*Origanum majorana*)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial. Treat as annual since it rarely over-winters. A small bush with white flowers. Produces gray-green leaves with slightly bitter undertone that are used to season vegetables, lamb, sausage, eggs, poultry, cheese dishes, potato salad, stuffings, soups.



Marjoram.

Growing. Plant in medium rich soil. Seedlings require shade until well started, then full sun. Space mature plants 8 to 10 inches. May be grown in containers indoors or outdoors.

Preserving. Cut stems just before buds begin to flower, leaving a few leaves to send up another crop. Tie in bundles and dry in an airy, shady place. Crumble when dry and store in airtight containers. To freeze, pack small bunches in plastic bags and place in freezer. If storage will be longer than 2 to 3 months, blanch before freezing.

Mint, Spearmint, Peppermint, Apple mint, Orange mint (*Mentha* spp.)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial with purple flowers. Refreshing odor and flavor. Often used as garnish. Flavor combines well with lamb, peas, fish sauces, candies, chocolate and vegetables. Crush leaves just before adding to a dish.

Growing. Plant seedlings in rich, moist soil. Thin beds every three to four years. Do not allow stalks to go to seed. Can be grown in containers indoors or outdoors. **Preserving.** Pick young, fresh leaves to dry. Hang in bunches in a warm, dry place away from strong sunlight. When dry, crumble and store in airtight containers. To freeze, see basil.



Mint.

Oregano (Spanish for wild marjoram; *Origanum vulgare*)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial. Treat as annual in Colorado as it doesn't survive the winter. Flavor similar to sweet marjoram, but stronger and more sage-like. Liberally used in Spanish and Italian dishes; component of chili powder.



Oregano.

Growing. Plant in light, well-drained soil in full sun. Shelter from cold winds. Space mature plants 12 inches. Can be grown in containers indoors or outdoors if roots are given enough room.

Preserving. See sweet marjoram for preserving.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*)--leaves

Characteristics. Annual. Good border plant. Finely curled, aromatic leaves are rich in vitamins A and C. Used as flavoring or garnish for soups, salads, egg, meat and poultry dishes, creamed vegetables and hot breads.



Parsley.

Growing. Plant in medium rich soil in sun or partial shade. Seeds give best results when started in cold-frame or window box. Space mature plants 6 to 8 inches. Good in pots indoors or outdoors, provided enough room is given for roots. Keep leaves producing by never allowing the plant to flower.

Preserving. Parsley can be dried as for basil, but the flavor is better if frozen. To freeze, see basil.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)--leaves

Characteristics. Small perennial pine-like bush belonging to mint family. Pale blue flowers. Leaves have a spicy odor and warm, piny taste. Used in vegetable and

meat dishes, cream soups, sauces and jellies. Makes a good tea.

Growing. Plant seedlings in well-drained soil in a sunny, sheltered spot. Space mature plants 6 inches apart. Bring inside in the winter.

Preserving. Although rosemary can provide fresh leaves throughout the year, it can be dried if desired. Cut stems and hang upside down in a cool, airy place until dry. Crumble and store in airtight containers.



Rosemary.

Saffron (*Crocus sativus*)

Characteristics. Annual. An autumn crocus with delicate lilac-colored flowers. The yellow stigmas have a pleasantly bitter flavor and give a yellow hue to foods. Used sparingly in sauces, cookies, cakes, chicken, gravies and Spanish rice.

Growing. Plant seedlings in well-drained soil in sheltered spot. Space mature plants 6 inches apart.

Preserving. Remove stigma in late fall and dry on a cloth in a warm room. Store stigma in airtight containers.



Saffron.

Sage (*Salvia* spp.)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial. Imported shrub with grey leaves. (Don't use American West varieties as these taste like turpentine.) Has strong bitter flavor. Used sparingly in stuffings, soups, stews, sausage and herb breads.

Growing. Plant in well-drained soil in full sun. Space mature plants 2 1/2 inches apart. Can be grown in containers indoors or outdoors in full sun.

Preserving. Pick leaves in spring before any flower buds form or flavor becomes musty. Hang in bunches in a warm, dry place away from strong sunlight. When dry, crumble and store in airtight containers. To freeze, pack in small plastic bags and place in freezer. If storing longer than three months, blanch before freezing.



Sage.

Summer savory (*Satureja* spp.)

Characteristics. Annual. Bushy plant with long narrow leaves and weak woody stems. Leaves are used to season poultry, soups, gravies, stuffings, salads, bean dishes and sauces for fish or veal.

Growing. Plant in medium rich soil in sun. Make several sowings three weeks apart. Thin seedlings to 6 inches apart. Can be grown in containers indoors or outdoors.

Preserving. Use only young, tender leaves. Remove woody stems. To dry, see mint.



Summer savory.

Tarragon (*Artemisia dracuncul*)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial. Slender dark green leaves with sweet anise scent. Considered an essential ingredient in many French dishes. Goes well with eggs, poultry, fish, shellfish and many vegetables. Used as flavoring in pickles and vinegar.

Growing. Plant in well-drained soil in full sun. Propagate by root divisions. Space mature plants 3 feet apart and subdivide every three years. Can be grown in containers indoors or outdoors if given enough room for the roots.

Preserving. To dry, see mint. To freeze, see sage.



Tarragon.

Thyme (*Thymus* spp.)--leaves

Characteristics. Perennial. Small shrub with tiny brownish-green leaves. The leaves have unexcelled aroma and flavor. Good with roast meats, fish chowders, sauces, soups, stews, stuffings and salads. Makes a flavorful tea.

Growing. Plant in well-drained soil in full sun. Clip back each spring. Space mature plants 10 inches apart. Good in containers indoors or outdoors.

Preserving. Cut sprigs before the plant flowers. Hang in a dry, shady place for a few weeks, then rub leaves for stems and store in airtight containers. To freeze, see sage.



Thyme.

References

Bay, Betty. *Herb Culture and Use*. Extension Pamphlet 122, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colo., 1969.

Dunn, Charolette. *A Guide to Herbs for Gardeners and Cooks*. Extension Pamphlet ZB2019, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis., 1976.

Lowman, M.S. and Miriam Birdseye. *Savory Herbs: Culture and Use*. Farmers's Bulletin No. 1977, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 1946.