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Drying Herbs

- Mary Sisson Eibs

All gardeners agree that the fruits of their labors are best enjoyed when they are picked fresh from the garden. This is especially true of herbs. My herb gardens are situated close to the back door of my house which is near the kitchen. Whenever I am planning a meal which requires a fresh herb I simply grab my harvesting basket and scissors and head for the garden. Sometimes I get a little carried away and cut several herbs which are not called for in the recipe but which I think might add a little variety to the dish.

However, I know that not all of my herbs will be available in their fresh form year round. Those who enjoy the taste of herbs in their cooking must think ahead during the bountiful times when their herb plants are at their peak of productivity. This is the time to start preserving those herbs for use during the "lean" times. Not all herbs are flavorful enough to bother with. Chives, basil, and balm are best enjoyed fresh whenever possible. Others tend to lose the fullness of their flavors and need to be used in larger quantities when dried. These include tarragon, dill, mints, and parsley.

When gathering fresh herbs for drying be sure to cut them just before they form seed heads when the leaves are at their fullest. Harvesting should be done in the morning after the dew has evaporated. Essential oils and aroma are at their peak early in the day. Cut the stems near the base of the plant, being sure to leave some smaller leaves on the stem, and rinse the leaves well to remove any soil or insects. Remove any old or damaged leaves at this time. Gather the stems into a bunch and secure them with a rubber band. I create hooks with paper clips and then hang them in my spare bedroom, which is warm, dark, and dry. If you have a drying rack and are only harvesting a small amount of herbs you can remove the leaves and dry them flat on the trays. The drying process is exceptionally quick in the southwest. When my herbs are completely dry I strip the leaves from the stems, being careful not to crush them, and store them in zip lock bags.

Herbs leaves may also be dried in the oven on a cookie sheet. Heat the oven to 200 degrees and place the pans on the middle rack for 10 minutes or until the herbs are crisp but not brown. Recently, herb books have described a process for drying herbs in the microwave oven. At Home With Herbs by Jane Newdick recommends placing herb leaves on a paper towel and cooking them on high for 30 seconds. Turn the leaves over and cook for another 30 to 60 seconds. Check frequently to avoid burning (p. 205).

Some herbs such as tarragon, basil, and sage can be preserved by freezing their leaves although they may be limp upon thawing. Leaves can also be frozen in ice cube trays for later use. Thyme and dill can be frozen in whole sprigs in freezer containers or bags. Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs describes a process for drying herbs such as parsley, coriander leaf, and rosemary in the refrigerator. They recommend placing unwashed bunches of herbs in a closed paper bag and leaving them for about one month (p. 116). Making herbal vinegars is one of my favorite ways to preserve the wonderful flavor of fresh herbs. Herbs such as tarragon, basil, oregano, and rosemary will add delicious flavor to red or white wine vinegars and they look lovely in shapely bottles. Other methods such as making flavored oils and vinegars are used by many herb gardeners although one should be careful to keep these products refrigerated to avoid spoiling.

However you choose to use the bounties of your herb gardens, by all means experiment with preserving them for later use. I find that those months when my most favorite herbs are unavailable in their fresh form are just a little more bearable when I can crumble a few of their dried leaves into my favorite dish. You've worked so hard in your beautiful herb gardens, so enjoy your herbs year round.