

Drying herbs

Most herbs dry easily, and under the proper conditions, retain their characteristic aroma and flavor.

Air drying

Although sunlight is drying, it destroys some of the herb flavor you're trying to preserve. So the best place for drying herbs is someplace dry and dark, with good ventilation. Try a dry attic, around a hot-water heater, on top of the refrigerator, or in a gas oven with a pilot light. Some people dry herbs on small screens placed inside a car; cover the herbs with paper toweling and park the car in light shade.

The best weather conditions for air drying: low humidity and soft breezes. Depending on the weather, you may find it necessary to speed the process with fans, dehumidifiers, or air conditioning.

Long-stemmed herbs, such as lavender, marjoram, some mints, rosemary, sage, savory, and yarrow, are easy to dry in bunches. Select only the highest-quality foliage and blossoms, removing any dead or wilted leaves. Group them in bunches about 1 inch in diameter, and tie the bunches with string or rubber bands, leaving a loop for hanging. Fasten the bunches on wire clothes hangers, and put the hangers in a warm, dry place away from direct sunlight. Make sure air can circulate freely around them. If you dry bunched herbs outside (in a shady spot), take them indoors at the end of the day so nighttime dew won't dampen them. When the bunches are crispy dry, remove the leaves from the stems, leaving the leaves intact if possible.

To prevent dust from settling into drying herbs, try placing bunches inside paper bags. Gather the top of the bag around the tied stem ends so leaves hang freely inside. Cut out the bottom of the bag and make holes in the sides for ventilation. Look inside a few bags after 1 week to make sure herbs are free of mold. The drying process takes a few weeks. When leaves are crispy dry, carefully remove them from the stems, leaving them intact if possible. Then spread the leaves on a baking sheet, and place the baking sheet in an oven set to 100 ° F for several minutes.

To dry herbs with short stems and small leaves, like thyme, try trays. (This also works for large-leafed herbs, but first strip the foliage from the stems.) Hold the stems upside down in one hand while running your other hand down the stem.) Spread the herbs in a single layer and place the tray in a warm, dry location away from sunlight. (Simple wooden frames with bottoms of window screen or cheesecloth are excellent and easy to make.) Every few days, gently stir or turn the herbs to assure thorough drying. Remove them from the trays when they're crispy dry.

Air drying flowers can rob them of their color. If you want to retain some of the color of the flower petal, focus on the following flowers: Bee balm, borage, and marigold. To dry whole flowers, spread borax or fine sand about ½ inch thick in a box. Place flowers face down; sift more borax or sand over them until they're covered. Set the box in a warm, dry place until flowers are dried (at least two weeks).

If you're collecting coriander, dill, or other herb seeds, snip off the seed heads when they've turned brown. Then blanch them to destroy insect pests that can hide inside. (Gather the seeds in cheesecloth and place them in boiling water, or place the seeds in a sieve and pour boiling water over them.) Then place the seeds on paper, in trays, or in bags to dry.

If you plan to sow the seeds, skip the blanching process, dry the seeds, then transfer them to a cool, dry location.

Oven, microwave, or dehydrator drying

To dry herbs in a hurry, try your oven, microwave, or dehydrator.

Place herbs on baking sheets and set the oven temperature to 80 to 100 ° F. Stir once every half hour. Drying should be complete in 3 to 6 hours. Herbs with fleshy leaves will take longer than those with tiny or thin leaves, so it is unwise to mix different leaf types in one batch. Remove the herbs when they are crispy dry, and before they turn brown.

Or place several stems on a double layer of paper towels, cover with a single layer of toweling, and put the herbs and 1 cup of water in the microwave. Some experts recommend drying at full power, some at low power. Whichever method you choose, check every 30 seconds to 1 minute for dryness. Stop the process if any sparks appear. If your herbs turn brown or black, try heating for shorter time periods.

Storing dried herbs

Choose airtight containers. Tins or canning jars with rubber seals work best. Or pack the dried herbs in resealable plastic bags, squeezing out the air before you seal them. Don't forget to label your containers!

Leaves retain flavor longer if you store them intact and break them up only as you use them.

All herbs lose flavor if they're exposed to light (through glass containers) or heat. So the best storage places are in cool cupboards or even in the refrigerator.

During the first week after you package your dried herbs, check to see if any moisture has condensed inside the container. If so, remove the herbs for further drying. Otherwise, they'll decay in storage.