

# Harvesting herbs

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## Prime picking time of day

If you plan to use fresh herbs immediately (within the day), you may pick and use them whenever you need them.

If you plan to use fresh herbs for later use, such as for drying, always harvest herbs early in the morning. The best picking time is just after the morning dew has dried, but before the sun has had a chance to warm them. The reason is that essential oils, which give herbs their flavor and fragrance, lose their quality when exposed to heat.

There's nothing wrong with morning dew, but wet leaves require a longer drying period before you can store them. For the same reason, don't harvest on rainy days. A cool, dry, sunny morning is best.

## Prime picking time of season

For herbs in which the flavor is in the foliage, prime picking time usually is when flowers start to open. At that stage, the oils that give each herb its distinctive quality are most concentrated.

Exceptions include sage, which you pick when buds first appear, and lavender, rosemary, and thyme, which are at their best when plants are in full bloom.

If your harvest objective is a seed crop for culinary use — for example, anise, coriander, or dill — wait until the seed heads are browned but not quite fully ripened, so the seeds don't scatter. The simplest procedure is to cut the entire seed heads or seed-bearing stems and put them in a paper bag; after drying, you can winnow seeds from chaff.

To harvest flowers for drying, choose newly opened blossoms that are fresh and bright.

## Picking tips

If you're collecting leaves, cut the whole stem before stripping away the foliage.

With small-leaved perennials, like rosemary and thyme, save only the leaves and discard the stems—or use the stems for potpourri.

When harvesting herbs that spread from a central growing point, like parsley, harvest the outer stems or leaves first.

If you're collecting leaves or flowers from bushy plants, do so from the top of the plant; new growth will come from below.

Specifically...

- Leave at least one half of stem: Bee Balm, catmint, lavender, lemon balm, lemon verbena, sweet marjoram, oregano, rosemary, rue, sages, santolina, winter savory, french tarragon, thymes, yarrow
- Leave at least four inches of stem: Basils, chamomile
- Leave at least two inches of stem: Chives
- Snip young leaves: Dill, fennel
- Snip stems down to ground: Lemon grass, mints
- Snip outside stems down to ground/main stalk: Chervil, cilantro, parsley

## One last piece of advice

Herbs retain their best qualities if they're left unwashed until it's time to use them.

When you do wash them, just swish them through cold water and pat them dry, or hang them in shade to drip dry.