

Get jump on preserving herbs early

By Maggie L. Moor-Orth
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Based on the response from the public during the annual Delaware Herb Festival, which was hosted by the Delaware Herb Growers and Marketers Association on the Delaware State University campus, more people are considering herb gardening. This column on drying herbs serves as a primer for new herb growers and as a reminder for experienced growers.

There are several reasons why you should not wait until the last days of summer to think about how and when you will preserve your herbs.

For one reason, you will be very busy trying to get them all dried or frozen before the first killing frost. But most importantly, you will have missed the prime harvesting time for most herbs. They should be gathered when they contain the maximum amount of oils for full flavor and fragrance.

Most herbs, for culinary use, are ready to harvest just before flowers appear on the plant. Cutting them early in the season enables continued, successive cuttings from the plant.

Harvesting perennial herbs late not only results in a reduction of flavor, but also in the possibility of plant death. These plants need the chance for regrowth in order to survive the winter.

Another caution is to not cut annuals, such as basil, too closely to the ground because the lower foliage is necessary for continuous plant growth. Keep in mind, at the end of the annuals' growing season, the entire plant can be harvested.

The ideal time of day to harvest herbs is in the early morning on a clear day. Do this just as the sun dries the dew from the leaves because the oils in the plants are strongest at this time. Scissors are often the best tool for harvesting fresh herbs.

As soon as the herbs have been cut, waste no time in getting them ready for drying. This practice shortens the drying time and generates better flavor and color.

Probably the most common



Submitted photo

Basil is a popular culinary herb used in a multitude of Italian dishes.

Garden Tales

method of drying herbs is the most picturesque. The mention of herb drying inevitably conjures up images of crispy-dry bunches hanging from a nail in someone's kitchen. To dry herbs this way, simply gather and tie them in small bunches and hang them in a warm, dark place for about two weeks.

A variation is to put each bunch in a paper bag, then hang them to dry. This method helps prevent the herbs from getting dusty, but will increase drying time by several weeks. This method is excellent for drying seed heads; for example, coriander, caraway, anise and dill. Seed heads should be gathered in the early stages of ripening, just as weeds turn from green to gray or brown. Again, they should be collected in the morning as soon as the dew dries on the leaves.

Another variation of air-drying is to take the herb plants apart and spread the parts on screens to dry. An old window screen in good condition works well. Remember

to prop it up to permit the air to circulate freely through the screen. Be sure it is not placed in the direct sun or in a damp area.

The last and fastest drying method is oven drying. Heat the oven to 150 or less, and place herbs on sheets of brown paper. Make slits in the paper to allow airflow around the herb foliage. Leave the oven door ajar so the moisture can escape. The herbs will dry in approximately three to six hours. When dried, they should

be crispy and easy to crumble.

However, don't crumble them for storing; wait to crumble when adding them to your recipe. And don't forget to label the containers.

Editor's note: Maggie Moor-Orth is the Home Horticulture agent for Delaware State University Cooperative Extension. For more information on herbs or other horticulture concerns, contact Maggie at (302) 857-6424, or mmoor@desu.edu.

Summer Gardening Advice

It's time to enjoy your flowers, herbs, and veggies.

- Mulch around plants to keep weeds to a minimum and retain moisture.
- Remove spent flowers to prevent perennials from using their energy on seed production, and to stimulate reblooming.
- As soon as a fruit or vegetable is ripe, remove it from the plant. Pull up any plants that aren't productive or that are past their prime.

- Water your garden early in the morning or in the late afternoon—times when the least amount of water will evaporate from the leaves.
- Save and use rainwater to water your garden.
- Aerate the soil in your lawn to allow water to penetrate.
- Potatoes can be dug as soon as the tops have died down.
- For a harvest that lasts all summer, sow beans every two weeks.

Source: www.almanac.com