

# Herbs – Growing and harvesting them

## GROWING

- Most herbs like six to eight hours of full sun. Don't worry, in our coastal regions the sun is still penetrating through the fog.
- Well-drained soil is essential. If drainage is poor, work in plenty of organic matter or grow in raised beds or containers.
- Work in a complete fertilizer (EB Stone Organic All Purpose, Tomato & Veg Food, Sure Start or Alfalfa Meal).
- Water regularly until plants are growing steadily. Most herbs will need only occasional watering once established. The exceptions are basil, chives, mint, and parsley which prefer evenly moist soil.
- Herbs can be tucked in established beds and borders or in a pot close to the kitchen door.
- Many herbs attract beneficial insects if they are allowed to flower.
- Annual herbs like basil, should not be allowed to flower.
- Keep plants pinched back regularly to keep them producing. It may be that you will want more than one plant of a type if you use it often.

## HARVESTING AND STORAGE

- Gather herbs when they have the optimum amount of essential oils. This is when they are just about to flower and the buds have formed but not opened. Harvest should be in the morning before the sun hits them but after the dew has dried (ideally, on a dry day that has been preceded by at least two sunny days). An exception to this rule is mint which has the most oil in the leaves when the plant is in full bloom.
- When gathering a large quantity of herbs use an open weave basket or container that allows good air circulation, not plastic bags. You can cut back a perennial herb to about half its height and can cut down an annual to a few inches or remove it entirely if it's the end of the season.
- Wash the plants in cool water immediately after gathering and spread on towels, and pat dry.
- To store in the refrigerator, place between damp paper towels and place in plastic bags.



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## **DRYING**

- Wash the plants in cool water, spread on towels and pat dry.
- Herbs with smaller leaves can be dried on the stem; these include thyme, summer and winter savory, rosemary, oregano and marjoram. Make small bunches. Tie them at the top and place in a brown paper bag, secure at the top and hang to dry. Herbs are dry when the leaves crumble off the stem. After crumbling off stem store in a clean, dark-colored jar.
- For some herbs, you must strip the leaves from the stems before drying; these include basil, dill, lemon balm, lovage, mint, sage, lemon verbena and tarragon. Place the herbs on a cookie sheet and dry in an oven at 125 degrees F for a few minutes before placing in an air-tight container.

## **FREEZING**

- Wash the plants in cool water, spread on towels and pat dry. Spread them in a single layer on a pan and put them in the freezer. After they are frozen place herbs in plastic bags, push all the air out of the bags, label and date them, and keep in the freezer.
- Herbs that freeze well are dill, mint, sorrel, sage, chervil, oregano, thyme, borage, summer and winter savory, chives and lemongrass. ( Chop chives and lemongrass before you freeze them.)
- Some herbs can be frozen in herb butters. The basic mix is ½ cup fresh chopped herbs to ½ cup softened butter, after mixing double roll in foil, label and date. Butter can be kept for up to two months. Thaw and use at room temperature. The herbs listed above can be used this way in addition to basil, lemon verbena, and scented geranium leaves.
- Another way to freeze herbs is to make a paste by mixing 1/3 cup of oil with 2 cups of herbs in a blender until smooth. The paste freezes beautifully in sealed jars. It will also keep for about a week in the refrigerator. Herbs that are good candidates for grinding into pastes include basil, chervil, cilantro, coriander, dill, fennel, marjoram, mint, parsley, rosemary, sage, savory, and tarragon.
- Herbs can also be frozen to make decorative ice cubes for party drinks. Boil the water first to make it clear, once it has cooled fill the bottom of the tray with the boiled water and freeze. Arrange the herbs you plan to freeze, then continue adding water until the tray is filled.