



LAST CHANCE TO PRESERVE THE FLAVORS OF SUMMER

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Now that autumn has arrived, it won't be long until frost claims our tender plants. There is still time however, to harvest some tender but savory herbs that so enhance our culinary dishes. Herbs like basil, summer savory, dill, cilantro and parsley can be cut and preserved before the cold winds blow.

Two of the easiest ways to preserve herbs are drying and freezing. Depending on the herb, leaves can either be air dried or dried in the microwave. When drying the little leaves of thyme, rosemary or summer savory, it probably would work best to tie small bunches of stems together with twine or rubber bands and hang for a few days in a warm, dry, well-ventilated area such as an attic or shed. Then the leaves can simply be slipped off the stem. Small leaved herbs can also be spread out and dried on parchment paper or even cut open paper bags.

For larger leaved herbs such as basil, parsley and even slender leaved dill, microwave drying might be the best course. Cut stems with leaves early in the day for best flavor. Wash your herbs and pat them dry with paper towels. Then with scissors or your fingers, remove leaves and place on a paper towel on a plate. Arrange the leaves so that as many as possible can fit on the paper towel but they are not overlapping to any great extent.



Basil. Photo by dmp2007

Microwave drying is my favorite way to preserve herbs as it takes a matter of moments, and this method not only preserves the flavor but also the color of herb leaves. Usually drying times start from 30 seconds to 1 minute depending on how powerful your microwave is. You may have to experiment a bit. Continue with 1 minute to 30 second bursts until the herbs are dry and crunchy. Then further crunch them up when just cooled.

Store either air dried or microwave dried herbs in air-tight glass or plastic containers. Be sure to label as it may be difficult to discern what herb these little dried pieces of leaves belong to after storing for a few months. Also include a date. Often, I will use empty storebought bottles of herbs to store more of the same herb grown and dried by me.

Freezing is another way to preserve herbs and works best for fleshy ones like basil and parsley. I like to blanch whole stems in boiling water for just 2 or 3 seconds. Then drop into ice cold water to stop leaves from cooking any further. Blanching not only cleans the surface of the leaves from dirt and debris but it stops certain enzyme actions that can lead to loss of flavor, color and texture.

Pat dry with a paper or dish towel and pick off the leaves. These will be placed in labeled freezer storage bags and placed in freezer.

A little more work but more useful to me is making herb ice cubes. These are made in portion ready cubes and easily add to any dish being created. Collect your herbs, wash them and pat dry and then chop or cut up into small pieces. Fill ice cube trays (about a tablespoon fresh herbs) half full. Add water to the top and freeze. Pop these out when frozen and place in a labelled freezer bag. This is also a good way to freeze edible flowers that would make quite a statement when entertaining during the holidays.

Other ways to preserve herbs and their flavors for future use include making herb butters, herb vinegars and oils. Some just keep for a couple of weeks but create quite the compliment when entertaining.

Plants like rosemary and bay are not winter hardy in Connecticut except in the more southern or coastal areas. Most will have to bring in these herbs to spend the winter indoors. Not an easy task as it is said that anyone who can overwinter a rosemary for 3 consecutive years is indeed a true horticulturist. Before bringing in, inspect for insects and maybe quarantine from any other houseplants for at least a month.

If you have questions about harvesting herbs or on other gardening topics, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahn.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.

