



Growing, Preserving and Using Herbs

Quick Facts...

- Herbs grow in temperate areas of the world.
- Their leaves and seeds are used to flavor foods.
- Their flavor comes from oils in the cell walls of the plants.
- When growing herbs in Colorado, supplemental watering is necessary.
- Start most perennial herbs from young plants.
- Start annual herbs from seed.
- Dried herbs can be stored effectively up to one year.

Herbs grow in temperate areas of the world. In contrast, spices grow only in tropical zones. The leaves and seeds of herbs often are used as complements to food dishes. Herb leaves can be used fresh, or they can be dried or frozen for later use. Seeds usually are dried before use. Their flavor comes from oils in the cell walls of the plants. Chopping or grinding breaks the cell walls and releases the flavor. Heat increases the rate at which some herbs release their flavors.

Using Herbs

For best results, use herbs to complement, not disguise, the flavor of food. Generally, 1/4 teaspoon of dried herbs per four servings is adequate. To substitute one form for another, use these amounts as guidelines: 1/4 teaspoon powdered herb = 1 teaspoon dried herb = 1 tablespoon chopped, fresh herb. Cooked foods are best if herbs are added during the last part of cooking. Herbs in uncooked foods, such as salad dressings, dips and fruits, need time to blend flavors, so add them as far in advance of serving as possible. Wrap whole herbs in a cheesecloth bag before adding them to cooked dishes. This makes it easy to remove them before serving.

Growing and Harvesting Herbs

A few different herbs in the Garden generally serve the needs of the average family. In Colorado, herbs need supplemental water to grow. Protect the crown of overwintering perennials with a loose covering of straw, and water occasionally to reduce the chance of winterkill. See Table 1 for individual herb growing tips.

Perennial herbs grow for more than one season and include sweet marjoram, parsley, mint, sage, thyme and chives. Most can be started from young plants. Start parsley, however, from seed. Some perennial herbs may winterkill in harsh weather. Treat these as annuals and replant them each year.

Annual herbs complete their life cycle in one year; start them from seed. Annual herbs include coriander, chervil, chives, oregano, basil and dill. Purchase seed from national seed firms, Garden supply stores and other outlets.

Many herbs can be successfully grown in large containers on a deck or patio. Clay, wooden or ceramic pots work well. Herbs planted in these containers often can be moved indoors before the first frost. If necessary, transplant them to smaller containers for indoor growth.

Gather herbs in the morning of a dry day, just after dew has evaporated. Label all herbs before they are dried because many look alike when dry.

Storing Herbs

Dried herbs store well for up to a year. Their strength can be judged by their aroma. Dried herbs can be stored whole or crushed, but whole herbs retain their flavor longer. To ensure optimum quality, store in rigid containers with airtight seals. Choose ceramic jars or darkened glass containers to help protect the herbs against light deterioration. Make sure herb leaves are completely dry to prevent mold growth during storage. Label all storage containers with the herb's name and date. Store in a cool, dry place. Quick-frozen herbs will keep up to two years in the freezer if well wrapped. Seal in airtight plastic bags, label with the herb's name, and date.

Table 1: Selected herbs.

Characteristics	Growing	Preserving
Anise (seeds)		
Annual. Grown for small oval, greenish-brown seeds with licorice flavor. Used in cookies, candies, pickles, beverages, breads and rolls.	Plant fresh seeds in moderately rich, well-drained soil. Likes sunshine. Space mature plants 6 to 8 inches apart.	Cut stems of seed heads after seeds have developed. To dry, place on frames of stretched cheesecloth in a cool shed or room. When dry, remove seeds and store in airtight container.
Basil, sweet (leaves)		
Annual. Good border plant. Dark green leaves have sweet flavor with wild pungency. Excellent with tomatoes, cheese, stews, meats, soups and green salads.	Plant seeds in well-drained, medium-rich soil. Likes sunny, sheltered spot. Space mature plants 12 inches apart. Can be grown in containers. Plant in rich soil and clip to first pair of leaves from base.	Cut stems 6 to 8 inches above ground when plant starts to flower. Hang upside down in warm, dry, dark room, or dry individual leaves on cheesecloth or netting screens. When dry, leaves crumble easily. Store whole or crushed in airtight containers. To freeze, wash leaves, pack in ice cube trays and fill with water. When frozen, remove cubes and store in plastic bags. Defrost in a strainer and use as fresh.
Bay (leaves)		
Perennial evergreen shrub. Move indoors for winter in Colorado. Leaves are aromatic with a sweetish odor and pungent flavor. A classic ingredient in French bouquet. Used in sauces, pickling, stews, and with meats and potatoes.	Plant in well-drained soil, sheltered from winds. Propagate from 4-inch cuttings. Clip often to maintain manageable size. May be grown in large containers indoors or out.	Pick individual leaves to use fresh or preserve. Dry leaves on screens in cool, dry, airy, shaded place. When dry, pack in airtight containers. To freeze, see basil.
Caraway (seeds)		
Biennial. Feathery foliage and creamy white flowers. Grown for its hard, brown, savory seeds. Mostly used whole in rye breads, sauerkraut, cheeses, potato salads, meats and stews.	Plant seeds in light soil. If sown in fall, they will produce ripe seeds the next year. Thin seedlings to 9 inches apart. Avoid transplanting due to long roots and tiny fibers.	Cut plants to ground level when flowers and stalks turn brown. Hang in small bunches by stems in airy place over cloth- or paper-lined containers. Seeds shake out easily when fully ripe. Store in airtight containers.
Chervil (leaves)		
Annual. Resembles a fine-leaved parsley and fennel combined. Has a light, licorice flavor with a wild taste of pepper. Gives delightful flavor to salads and salad dressings, meats, fish, soups, omelets and stews.	Plant seeds like basil, but in shade or part shade. Avoid transplanting. Space mature plants 9 inches apart. May be grown in containers indoors or out.	Pick only young, fresh leaves to dry. To dry or freeze, see basil.
Chives (leaves)		
Perennial. Attractive border plant. Similar to green onion, but milder and finer leaves. Used for light, oniony flavor in salads, dips, sauces, vegetables, soups, fish, etc.	Plant bulbs or starter clumps in light, medium-rich soil in sunny place. Cut flower stalks to the ground after blooming. Thin clumps every third spring. Space mature plants 5 inches apart. Transfer some clumps to grow in containers indoors or out.	Use leaves fresh by snipping off the tops with scissors. Chives lose their color and flavor when dried. To freeze, wash and chop finely, then continue as for basil.

Characteristics	Growing	Preserving
Coriander (seeds)		
Annual. Delicate, lacy foliage with pinkish-white flowers. May reach 20 to 30 inches tall. Small, orange-flavored seeds used in cold cuts, curry powder, cakes, cookies, poultry dressings, French dressing and Scandinavian cooking.	Plant seeds in light, medium-rich soil in sun. Avoid transplanting. Space mature plants 10 inches apart. If allowed, will reseed.	Cut off seed heads and dry in an airy place on screens over cloth-lined container. When seeds are dry, shake out of heads and store in airtight containers. Flavor improves if stored a month before using.
Dill (seeds, leaves)		
Annual. Feathery foliage, flower umbels. Grows 2-3 feet tall. Seeds have slightly bitter taste. Used in soups, pickles, cheese dishes, breads, sauces, meats and fish. Dill weed has delicate bouquet. Used to flavor fish sauces, salads, dips, potatoes and meats.	Plant seeds in medium-rich, sandy, well-drained soil in sun. Needs wind protection. Avoid transplanting. May be staked when 18 inches tall. Thin seedlings to 12 inches apart. Do not plant near fennel or they may cross-pollinate.	Cut young leaves and spread in a thin layer to dry until brittle. Crumble leaves and store in an airtight container. To collect seeds, cut flower umbel stalks or pull entire plant from ground. Hang upside down in a sunny place to dry. Shake seeds out when dry. Store in airtight containers.
Fennel (stems, leaves, seeds)		
Annual. Often reseeds. Bright green, feathery foliage with yellow flowers. Yellowish-brown seeds with sharp, sweet, licorice-like flavor. Use leaves as garnish or flavoring in sauces and salads. Use seeds to flavor sausages, breads, salads, salad dressings, pickles, soups and sauces.	Plant seed in well-drained soil in sunny spot. Thin seedlings to 2 feet apart. Don't plant near dill, coriander or caraway if you plan to save the seed to replant. Makes a good container plant indoors or out when kept trimmed to 12 inches.	Young stems can be used like celery. Pick young leaves to dry, as for basil. Cut off flower stems before seeds fall. Hang over a cloth in a warm, dry place until seeds can be shaken out. Store in airtight containers.
Marjoram, sweet (leaves)		
Perennial; treated as an annual since it rarely overwinters. Small bush with white flowers. Gray-green leaves with slightly bitter undertone. Used to season vegetables, lamb, sausage, eggs, poultry, cheese dishes, potato salad, stuffings and soups.	Plant in medium-rich soil. Requires shade until well started, then full sun. Space mature plants 8-10 inches apart. May be grown in containers indoors or out.	Cut stems just before buds begin to flower, leaving a few leaves to send up another crop. Tie in bundles and dry in an airy, shady place. When dry, crumble and store in airtight containers. To freeze, pack small bunches in plastic bags and place in freezer. Blanch before freezing if storing more than 2-3 months, .
Mint, spearmint, peppermint, apple mint, orange mint (leaves)		
Perennial. Purple flowers. Refreshing odor and flavor. Often used as garnish. Flavor combines well with lamb, peas, fish sauces, candies, chocolate and vegetables. Crush leaves just before adding to a dish.	Plant seedlings in rich, moist soil. Thin beds every 3-4 years. Do not allow to go to seed. Can be grown in containers indoors or out.	Pick young, fresh leaves to dry. Hang in bunches in a warm, dry place away from strong sunlight. When dry, crumble and store in airtight containers. To freeze, see basil.
Oregano (leaves)		
Perennial treated as an annual because it doesn't overwinter. Flavor similar to sweet marjoram, but stronger and more sage-like. Liberally used in Spanish and Italian dishes; component of chili powder.	Plant in light, well-drained soil in full sun. Shelter from cold winds. Space mature plants 12 inches apart. Can be grown in containers indoors or out if roots given enough room.	See sweet marjoram for preserving.
Parsley (leaves)		
Annual. Good border plant. Finely curled, aromatic leaves are rich in vitamins A and C. Used as flavoring or garnish for soups, salads, eggs, meat and poultry dishes, creamed vegetables and hot breads.	Plant in medium-rich soil in sun or part shade. Seeds best started in cold frame or window box. Space mature plants 6-8 inches. Good in pots indoors or out if roots given enough room. Keep leaves producing by never allowing plant to flower.	Parsley can be dried as for basil, but the flavor is better if frozen. To freeze, see basil.

Characteristics	Growing	Preserving
Rosemary (leaves)		
Perennial. Small, pine-like bush in mint family. Pale blue flowers. Leaves have a spicy odor and warm, piny taste. Used in vegetable and meat dishes, cream soups, sauces and jellies. Makes a good tea.	Plant seedlings in well-drained soil in a sunny, sheltered spot. Space mature plants 6 inches apart. Bring inside in the winter.	If brought inside to winter, provides fresh leaves throughout the year. To dry, cut stems and hang upside down in a cool, airy place. When dry, crumble and store in airtight containers.
Saffron (stigma)		
Annual. An autumn crocus with delicate, lilac flowers. Yellow stigmas are pleasantly bitter, give a yellow hue to foods. Used sparingly in sauces, cookies, cakes, chicken, gravies and Spanish rice.	Plant seedlings in well-drained soil in sheltered spot. Space mature plants 6 inches apart.	Remove stigma in late fall and dry on a cloth in a warm room. Store stigma in airtight containers.
Sage (leaves)		
Perennial. Imported shrub with gray leaves. Don't use Western U.S. varieties, as these taste like turpentine. Strong bitter flavor. Used sparingly in stuffings, soups, stews, sausage and herb breads.	Plant in well-drained soil in full sun. Space mature plants 2 1/2 inches apart. Can be grown in containers indoors or out in full sun.	Pick leaves in spring before flower buds form, or flavor becomes musty. Hang in bunches in a warm, dry place away from strong sun. When dry, crumble and store in airtight containers. To freeze, pack in small plastic bags. To store more than three months, blanch before freezing.
Summer savory (leaves)		
Annual. Bushy plant with long, narrow leaves and weak, woody stems. Used in poultry, soups, gravies, stuffings, salads, bean dishes, sauces for fish or veal.	Plant in medium-rich soil in sun. Make several sowings three weeks apart. Thin seedlings to 6 inches apart. Can be grown in containers indoors or out.	Use only young, tender leaves. Remove woody stems. To dry, see mint.
Tarragon (leaves)		
Perennial. Slender, dark green leaves with sweet anise scent. Considered essential in many French dishes. Goes well with eggs, poultry, fish, shellfish and many vegetables. Used as flavoring in pickles and vinegar.	Plant in well-drained soil in full sun. Propagate by root divisions. Space mature plants 3 feet apart. Subdivide every three years. Can be grown in containers indoors or out if roots given enough room.	To dry, see mint. To freeze, see sage.
Thyme (leaves)		
Perennial. Small shrub with tiny, brownish-green leaves. The leaves have unexcelled aroma and flavor. Good with roast meats, fish chowders, sauces, soups, stews, stuffings and salads. Makes a flavorful tea.	Plant in well-drained soil in full sun. Clip back each spring. Space mature plants 10 inches apart. Good in containers indoors or out.	Cut sprigs before the plant flowers. Hang in a dry, shady place for a few weeks, then rub leaves from stems and store in airtight containers. To freeze, see sage.