

Growing, Drying and Freezing Your Own Herbs

These annual, perennial and sometimes shrubby plants are often grown by amateur gardeners, and cultivated for their culinary and sometimes medicinal uses, although they can make attractive specimen plants in mixed borders. In most gardens, a small plot can easily be set aside for growing a few choice herbs.

Large or medium Patio style planters and hanging baskets, near the kitchen, using cultivated herbs is fast becoming a popular hobby, as healthier lifestyles are sought throughout the world. The aromatic fragrances are also so refreshing on those balmy summer days as you lay basking and relaxing in the sunshine, enjoying your iced lemon teas.

Generally, herbs need a light, fertile, well-drained soil or compost, in full sun. They can easily be grown in odd corners in the garden, but if space allows, a designated herb garden is the most convenient and can be a most attractive way of grouping them. The ancient Romans, Greeks and indeed even the great traditional English gardeners, all enjoyed and treasured their herb gardens in there many shapes, sizes and complexities throughout history.

Ideally the site should be a south facing position, and on a slight slope to aid drainage. Herb beds should be arranged and planned to make access easier to each group of plants, placing the taller varieties to the back or centralised, where they won't overshadow the smaller ones, and keep moisture loving varieties to the bottom of any slope. Raised bed culture is also ideal for an herb garden feature, add a waterfall or running water and enjoy the relaxing aromatic tranquility it creates.

Many herbs can be grown from seed in window boxes, on patios, in pots on outside windowsills, hanging baskets or that old discarded wheelbarrow. Use John Innes potting compost No 1 or 2, or a similar good quality brand from your local garden supply centre, and put a good layer of broken crocks or small polystyrene pieces in the bottom to ensure good drainage. Keep the compost just moist during the growing season, and give a liquid feed occasionally, to encourage good growth. The actual windowsill or patio should preferably face south or west, so that the plants receive direct sunshine for the greater part of the day.

The culinary and medicinal uses of individual herbs is beyond this article, but generally the best and fullest flavours always come from the freshest of your picked herbs which will keep for only a limited period in well sealed, and dry air tight plastic containers in your refrigerator. For winter use, herbs must be dried or frozen. Certain evergreen herbs, such as chives and dill, are not suitable for drying and ideally should be frozen or the plants re-potted up for growing indoors, within a conservatory, glasshouse, or on a sunny windowsill.

HARVESTING AND DRYING YOUR HERBS

The time off harvesting individual herbs varies according to whether the herbs are being grown for their leaves, flowers, seeds or stems.

Plants grown for their leaves and stems should be gathered in the young leafy stage before flowering begins for best flavour. Harvest flower heads whilst in full bloom, and the seeds when the pods begin to open and split naturally as they turn yellow or golden brown.

Always choose a dry day for harvesting your herbs, and gather then early in the day before the sun becomes hot, but just after the morning dew has evaporated, to lock in the flavours. Handle the leafy shoots and sprigs carefully to avoid bruising. Large leaves can be stripped from the stems before drying but small leafed types are best left intact. Discard all damaged and discoloured leaves, and if possible wash the remainder gently in cold water. Spread the leaves thinly in flat shallow containers, ideally on cheesecloth-covered frames, which will allow air to circulate. Place the containers in a dry, airy and warm place out of the direct sunlight. An airing cupboard or the warming drawer of a cooker is suitable provided there is reasonable ventilation. Leave for at least 4 to 5 days turning the herbs once a day. They are ready for storing when they become brittle and rustle slightly when touched.

An alternative method is to tie into small bunches and hang upside down in a shaded, dry, warm and airy place. These will take a little longer to dry out completely. You can dry out your herbs quicker in front of a fire, or within an oven on low heat but some of the aroma and flavour will be lost.

The leaves should be completely dry before storing. When completely dry large leaved varieties should be stripped from their stems, small leaved, and fine-stemmed herbs such as rosemary, thyme and bay, retain their flavour better when stored whole and crumbled before use. Discard as much chaff (waste) as possible and pack the leaves or sprigs into small, preferably opaque containers. Clear jars should be stored in a dark place. Remember to seal and label each jar immediately. Herbs both dried or frozen, may be stored separately according to variety, or as your favourite mixtures and combinations. It is often labour saving to make up your herb bouquet, tied in muslin bags at the drying stage.

The procedure for drying flower heads and seedpods are the same. Loosen seeds by rubbing pods between your palms until the seeds drop out. This is best done outside with a slight breeze present as this will blow away some of the chaff. Once separated dry your seed for a further week and once completely dry store in the same way as for the leaves.

FREEZING YOUR HERBS

Freezing is an excellent way of preserving and storing your herbs, especially chervil and parsley, which have tender leaves unsuitable for home drying. Gather and wash your herbs and place them in a metal colander. Blanche the herbs by immersing your colander in boiling water for 1 minute, then into cold water. Leave to thoroughly cool, drain and freeze

immediately, storing in small plastic bags, ice cube making or plastic containers, kitchen foil or even waxed cartons. Frozen herbs need not be thawed before use in soups, stews or gravy's and can actually be chopped more easily whilst frozen. Frozen herbs are best used for flavouring as they become limp when thawed, and so useless as garnishes. Never refreeze.

OTHER USES FOR YOUR DRIED HERBS

Apart from their culinary and medicinal uses which is beyond this article to explain in any depth, your dried herbs may also be used to make sachets, pot-pourri's and pomanders, which give off a long lasting aromatic fragrance to rooms, airing cupboards, drawers and linen closets. Lavender sachets are so well known, but many other herbs and flowers make pleasant mixtures.

Particularly pleasant fragrant and aromatic mixtures include:-

- 1/. Lemon thyme with verbena.
- 2/. Fragrant leaved geraniums with rosemary.
- 3/. Lavender, rosemary and a few cloves with a piece of orange, lemon or lime zest.
- 4/. Equal parts of peppermint, lemon verbena, lemon balm, rose geranium and rose petals.

Well my friends I hope you've enjoyed today's "Over The Garden Wall with Oaky"... it's off to the potting shed for me, as an amateur gardener's work is never done no matter what time of year it is... "HAPPY GARDENING" until we meet again.

John Elliott aka Oaky Wood together with Luella May co-founded <http://thecorner4women.com>

John has been an avid Amateur Gardener for over 25 years and is now "Motivating & Empowering Women, in the Home, for Business, Health & Leisure" through his informative articles