

# Shopping for Health: Herbs and Spices<sup>1</sup>

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Herbs and spices have been used for hundreds of years in cooking and medicine (Stephens 2010). They add a wide range of flavors to food and may also provide health benefits. Herbs and spices in cooking may help to prepare flavorful, healthy recipes.



Figure 1.

## What is the difference between herbs and spices?

People often wonder what the difference is between an herb and a spice. It simply depends on the part of the plant that is used. Herbs come from the leaves of plants that do not have woody stems and grow close to the ground in mild climates. Spices are native to warm, tropical climates and are obtained from roots, flowers, fruits, seeds, or bark. Spices tend to have a stronger and more potent flavor than herbs, so they are used in smaller amounts (Spicer 2003). Herbs and spices are commonly referred to as “seasonings” when they are used together.

## Do herbs and spices have health benefits?

Perhaps the greatest health benefit of using herbs and spices is that they serve as flavorful alternatives to salt, fat, and sugar without adding any extra calories to meals. Instead of adding sugar to oatmeal, sweet potatoes, and desserts, add spices like cinnamon and allspice. For savory meals, replace salt with spices like black pepper, cumin, and dill seed. Try flavoring foods with herbs and spices instead of using breading, gravies, and sauces. Seasoning meats with herbs and spices and cooking them is a healthy alternative to breading and frying—an easy, flavorful way to reduce fat intake. Adopting changes like these can help reduce sodium, fat, and sugar in your diet.

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## Choosing Herbs and Spices

Certain seasonings pair better with some foods better than with others. Tables 1 and 2 list a few common herbs and spices. There are many more you can try, so be brave and experiment with your own combinations!

## Should I use fresh or dried herbs?

The choice is completely up to you. Fresh herbs are not equal to dry in terms of the amounts that should be added to foods. A tablespoon of finely cut, fresh herb equals about 1 teaspoon of dried herb or  $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon of ground, dried herb (Stephens 2010). In addition, fresh and dried herbs must be stored differently to ensure freshness. The tips below will help to ensure that seasonings stay fresh long after they are purchased.

### Fresh

When choosing fresh herbs, avoid ones with brown or wilted leaves. Basil, cilantro, dill, oregano, parsley, thyme, and many more should be stored in the refrigerator. You can expect them to stay fresh for 2–3 weeks, although some of the flavor and aroma will be lost after the first week (Cantwell and Reid 2001). For short-term use (within a week), herbs can be refrigerated in a covered container with some water.

### Frozen

To preserve herbs for an extended period, you can freeze them. To do this properly, place them on a cookie sheet and then transfer them to the freezer. Once the herbs are frozen, package them in airtight containers and store them in the freezer. Frozen herbs are limp when thawed, so it is best to use them in cooked dishes.

### Dried

Dried herbs and spices never actually spoil, but their flavor and aroma fade over time. They should be stored in a cool, dry place in tight containers and away from heat. When cooking, keep the container away from steaming pots to avoid exposure to moisture (Stephens 2010). Herbs that come in large flakes, such as parsley, basil, and oregano, remain fresh for 1–3 years. Ground spices, such as paprika, cinnamon, and nutmeg, can be kept for 2–3 years. Cinnamon sticks, peppercorns, and any other whole spice can be used for up to 5 years (Dermody 2004).

## Cooking with Herbs and Spices

Delicate herbs, such as basil or chives, should be added just before serving because their flavor can be lost during the cooking process. Herbs that are less delicate, such as oregano and thyme, can be added early in the process. Because the flavor of red pepper gets stronger as it is cooked, cayenne pepper should be added in small amounts to begin with, then increased as needed. Always use small amounts to start with when adding herbs and spices. For 1 pound of meat or 2 cups of soup or sauce, use  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of dried ground herbs and add more if desired (Stephens 2010). When adding herbs and spices to foods that are served cold, it is important to refrigerate the food for a few hours to ensure that the flavors of the seasoning are well absorbed (Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center 2001).

## Summary

Using herbs and spices is a great way to reduce salt, sugar, and fat in your diet while adding bold new flavors. It is a good idea to plan your meals before going to the grocery store so that you know which herbs and spices you will need. Use the advice above to keep seasonings fresh and flavorful. The examples listed above are just a snapshot of possible uses, so be creative! Follow these tips, and you will spice up your cooking in no time.

## References

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Table 1. Common herbs.

Name	Source	Flavor	Best used	Pair with
<b>Basil (sweet)</b>	Leaves and stems of the basil plant	Pungent, somewhat sweet	Fresh	Eggs, fish, marinades, meat, salads, sauces, seafood dishes, stews, tomato dishes, and vegetables
<b>Bay leaf</b>	Leaves of the sweet bay tree	Mild	Dried	Add two or three leaves to gravies, sauces, soups, and stews (remove leaves before serving)
<b>Chive</b>	Leaves of the chive plant, a member of the onion family	Sharp, onion/garlic flavor	Fresh, or frozen if fresh is not available	Chicken, cream cheese, cream sauces, eggs, fish, lamb, mayonnaise, sour cream, and vegetable dishes
<b>Cilantro</b>	Leaves of the coriander plant	Spicy, sweet, or hot	Fresh	Salsas, guacamole, and salads
<b>Dill</b>	Leaves and seeds of the dill plant	Mild, somewhat sour	Leaves are best fresh; seeds are used whole	Breads, cream cheese, cottage cheese, chowders, dips, meat, potato salads, rice dishes, soups, stews, and vegetables
<b>Fennel</b>	Leaves and stems of the fennel plant	Like anise, but sweeter and lighter	Raw or cooked	Fish, Italian sausage, seafood sauces, soup, spaghetti sauces, stews, and sweet potatoes
<b>Oregano</b>	Leaves of the oregano plant	Warm and bitter	Fresh or dried	Eggs, fish, green salads, Italian dishes, meats, Mexican dishes, mushroom dishes, omelets, poultry, sauces, soups, spaghetti, spreads, tomato sauces, and vegetables
<b>Parsley</b>	Leaves of the parsley plant	Mildly peppery	Fresh; dried is a poor substitute	Dips, dressings, garnishes, herb spreads, omelets, potato dishes, sauces, soups, and vegetables
<b>Rosemary</b>	Leaves of the rosemary plant	Very aromatic, slightly lemony, and piney	Fresh or dried	Fish dishes, herb breads, marinades, potato dishes, sauces, soups, and vegetables
<b>Sage</b>	Leaves of the sage plant	Musty, slightly bitter	Fresh or dried	Cheese dishes, chowders, omelets, pork, poultry, and rice dishes
<b>Tarragon</b>	Leaves of the French tarragon plant	Anise-like	Fresh or frozen	Chicken, fish, salads, salad dressings, sauces, shellfish, soups, and vegetables
<b>Thyme</b>	Leaves of the thyme plant	Minty, lemony	Fresh or dried	Cheese, fish, salad dressings, shellfish, soups, stews, stuffing, tomato sauces, and vegetables

Table 2. Common spices.

Name	Source	Flavor	Best used	Pair with
<b>Anise</b>	Seeds of the anise plant	Sweet, like licorice	Dried seeds	Apple pie, cakes, coleslaw, cookies, cottage cheese, fruit dishes, salad dressing, and spicy meat mixtures
<b>Capers</b>	Unopened flower buds from the caper bush	Pungent	Pickled in liquid brine	Beef gravies, deli sandwiches, eggplant dishes, salads, sauces, and tomato dishes
<b>Caraway</b>	Seeds of the caraway plant	Sweet, nutty	Whole	Baked goods, cabbage, carrots, cheeses, coleslaw, cucumber salads, green beans, pickles, potatoes, and sausage
<b>Cardamom</b>	Seeds from the cardamom tree, a member of the ginger family	Slightly sweet and spicy	Whole or ground	Breads, cakes, cookies, curries, custards, punches, and rice
<b>Cayenne</b>	Ground dried fruit or seeds of the cayenne pepper plant	Fiery hot	Dried and ground, or fresh and finely chopped	Curries, meats, Mexican dishes, sauces, and stews
<b>Celery seed</b>	Seeds of the celery plant	Strong, pungent celery flavor	Dried whole seed	Breads, coleslaw, egg salads, potato salads, and tuna salads
<b>Cinnamon</b>	Dried bark of the cinnamon tree	Pungently sweet	Dried sticks or ground powder	Breads, cakes, chicken, coffee, cookies, pork, spiced beverages, sweet potatoes, squash, tea, yogurt (often paired with allspice, cloves, and nutmeg)
<b>Clove</b>	Dried flower buds of the clove tree	Sweet or bittersweet	Dried and ground	Baked goods, beets, chili sauces, cookies, curries, fruit sauces/syrups, gingerbread, squash, and tomato sauces
<b>Coriander</b>	Seeds of the coriander plant	Spicy, sweet, or hot	Ground or whole	Baked goods, beverages, candies, curries, dairy desserts, meats, and relishes
<b>Cumin</b>	Seeds of the cumin plant	Peppery	Whole or ground	Chili powders, curries, meats, stews, tofu, and vegetable dishes
<b>Garlic</b>	Bulbs of the garlic plant, a member of the onion family	Pungent, onion-like, mildly hot	Fresh, or granulated if fresh is not available	Breads, fish, Italian dishes, meat, soups, stews, and tomato sauce
<b>Ginger</b>	Roots of the ginger plant	Mix of pepper and sweetness	Dried powder or freshly grated from root	Beets, beverages, breads, cakes, cheese dishes, chutneys, cookies, curries, dipping sauce, dressings, meat, poultry, soups, stews, and yellow vegetables
<b>Mace</b>	Outer covering of the nutmeg seed	Like nutmeg, but stronger	Dried or ground	Baked goods, pickles, and stews
<b>Mustard</b>	Seeds of the mustard plant	Hot and tangy	Powdered or whole seeds	Dips, cheese dishes, eggs, fish, pickling spice, salad dressings, sauces, spreads, tofu, and vegetables
<b>Nutmeg</b>	Seeds of the nutmeg tree	Warm, spicy, sweet	Freshly ground	Applesauce, baked goods, beverages, cheese dishes, cream dishes, desserts, ground meats, pies, sauces, soups, stews, and many vegetables
<b>Paprika</b>	Fruit of a sweet pepper plant	Sweet to hot, somewhat bitter	Dried and ground	Eggs, cheese, Hungarian goulash, pasta, potatoes, and sauces
<b>Saffron</b>	Dried stigmas and upper styles of the saffron crocus plant	Pungent, aromatic	Dried and ground	Use small amounts crushed in breads, cakes, fish, poultry, and rice dishes
<b>Turmeric</b>	Root of the turmeric plant, a tropical plant related to ginger	Pungent, somewhat bitter	Dried or ground	Curry powders, egg dishes, Indian dishes, rice dishes, and salad dressings