

Cooking with Fresh Herbs¹

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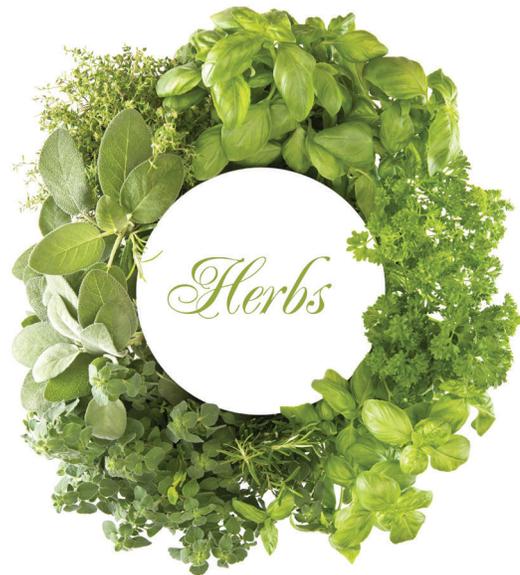
People worldwide are becoming more adventurous when cooking with fresh herbs. If you are just starting to use fresh herbs in your cooking or need a refresher, these tips for washing, storing, and cooking with herbs will lead you in the right direction.



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The History of Herbs

The use of herbs in cooking dates back thousands of years. During that time, it was thought that herbs and spices had properties that were beneficial to human health, but it wasn't until recent years that scientists established just how good herbs are for one's health.



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Early settlers brought herbs to the new world to use as remedies for illnesses, to store with linens, and to mask the bland flavors or spoiling of food. Colonists introduced each other to the herb gardening style known as “kitchen gardens,” which involved growing herbs, along with

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vegetables and flowers, in gardens just outside the kitchen door for convenience and safety. To colonists, herbs were as important to their health, and the quality of their food, as were vegetables. The interest in herbs continued through the Revolutionary War to the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, who grew 26 kinds of herbs in his personal kitchen garden. As civilizations continued to grow, so did the understanding of how to utilize the abundant variety of fresh herbs in cooking.

Herbs are the leaves of temperate climate plants; temperate climates have summers and winters of similar length. Examples of herbs include basil, thyme, sage, rosemary, and oregano. Today, herbs often are used in cooking to enhance the flavor of foods without the addition of extra fat, sugar, or sodium.

Buying Fresh Herbs

It is best to buy herbs close to the time when you will use them to ensure their freshness. Also, if possible, buy herbs in small bundles or packages so you will be able to use them before they lose their peak flavor. If buying a small quantity is not an option, split the bundle with friends or family, plan your next week's meals around the herbs you bought, or dry what isn't unused!

Look for herbs that are rich in color and aroma. They should smell fresh and crisp, not musty, and shouldn't be wilted or discolored. If you are unsure of their quality, remove a few of the stems from the bunch. If the stems alone can support the leaves, the herbs are fresh. If the stems wilt, it would be best to pick a different bunch.

Fresh herbs are available at local supermarkets and farmers markets. Stock may be limited in small grocery stores. Herbs come packaged in loose plastic bags, tied in bunches, or in plastic containers. At the supermarket, fresh herbs can be found in or near the fresh vegetable section.



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Washing Fresh Herbs

It is important to wash herbs before cooking or storing them to remove dirt or grit. Rinse small portions under cool, running water. Once all the dirt has been washed away, gently shake the herbs or carefully spin dry them in a salad spinner. Remove excess water by lightly patting with a dry paper towel.

For larger herb bundles, fill a clean sink or a large, deep bowl with cool water. Place the herbs in the water and move them around to get rid of any dirt. Remove the herbs from the dirty water, drain, refill with clean water, and continue the washing processes. Follow the previous steps until your water is clear and no dirt is left behind. To dry, you can either gently shake the herbs or carefully spin dry them in a salad spinner. Again, remove any excess water by lightly patting with a dry paper towel.



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Storing Fresh Herbs

The longer herbs are stored, the less appealing and flavorful they become. If you buy herbs a few days before you will use them, it is important to refrigerate the herbs properly to conserve their color and flavor.

Make sure any ties or rubber bands are removed from the herb bundles before storing. Throw away leaves that are discolored or limp. In order to extend the freshness of the herbs for about one week, cut the stems diagonally as if you were cutting flower stems. Place the newly-cut stems in a jar, vase, or tall glass with one to two inches of water. Cover the herbs with a plastic bag, leaving space

for air to circulate. Another way to store herbs is to simply place them in an open or only partly-closed plastic bag or container. Whichever method you choose, be careful to avoid crushing your herbs. Also, store your herbs in the warmest part of your refrigerator to avoid the possibility of freezing.

If you don't plan on using the herbs within a week of purchase, it may be best to freeze them. You can follow these easy steps for freezing fresh herbs from the National Center for Home Food Preservation:

- Wash, drain, and pat dry with paper towels.
- Wrap a few sprigs or leaves in freezer wrap and place in a freezer bag.
- Seal and freeze.

Another effective way to freeze herbs is to chop them, put them in ice cube trays, cover with water, and freeze. The ice around them seals out air and helps preserve their flavor and aroma. Thaw as many cubes as needed for your next dish.

Make sure to label the freezer bag with the name of the herb and the date. Fresh herbs tend to lose their color and become wilted during freezing, causing all herbs to look the same. Herbs that have been frozen are generally used in cooked meals rather than as a garnish because of their appearance.

Cooking with Fresh Herbs

Many people are hesitant when it comes to cooking with fresh herbs because they are unsure of which ones and how much to use, how to prepare the herbs, and when to add during the cooking process. However, using fresh herbs when you cook is a great way to minimize unhealthy food additives, especially salt, and add new flavors to your classic dishes.



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There is no general rule about how much to use. Most recipes specify an amount in the list of ingredients. Keep in mind that it is okay to use more or less than the recipe calls for, but until you know how your taste buds will react to the flavor of the herbs, it is best to start with small amounts and add more if desired.

If you don't have a recipe to follow, start with $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon and add more as needed to reach your ideal flavor. You don't want the herbs to overpower the other flavors in the dish. When doubling a recipe, do not double the herbs or spices. Increase their amounts by $1\frac{1}{2}$. If a recipe calls for dried herbs, you can substitute fresh herbs. Dried herbs are stronger than fresh herbs so you will need to use more of the fresh herbs. If the recipe calls for 1 teaspoon of dried, crushed herbs or $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of powdered herbs, use 3 teaspoons (1 tablespoon) of fresh. The following dried-herb blends are great to try with any dish. Remember to adjust the amount when using fresh herbs.

Salt-Free Blend—makes about $\frac{1}{3}$ cup

- 1 tablespoon mustard powder
- 2 teaspoons parsley
- 2 teaspoons onion powder
- 2 teaspoons thyme
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 2 teaspoons dill weed
- 2 teaspoons savory
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 2 teaspoons lemon peel



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Italian Seasoning—makes about 1½ cups

- ½ cup dried oregano
- ½ cup dried basil
- ¼ cup dried parsley
- 1 tablespoon fennel seeds, crushed
- 2 tablespoons dried sage
- 1 tablespoon hot red pepper flakes

Garden Blend—makes about 1¼ cup

- 3 tablespoons dried parsley
- 3 tablespoons dried basil
- 3 tablespoons dried thyme
- 3 tablespoons dried marjoram
- 3 tablespoons dried rosemary
- 3 tablespoons dried chives
- 3 tablespoons paprika
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder



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Poultry Herbs—makes about ½ cup

- 2 tablespoons dried tarragon
- 1 tablespoon dried marjoram
- 1 tablespoon dried basil
- 1 tablespoon dried rosemary
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon dried lovage

Fish Herbs—makes about ½ cup

- 3 tablespoons dried dill weed
- 2 tablespoons dried basil
- 1 tablespoon dried tarragon
- 1 tablespoon dried lemon thyme
- 1 tablespoon dried parsley
- 1 tablespoon dried chervil
- 1 tablespoon dried chives

Herbs de Provence (used for marinating and grilling meats)—makes about 2 cups

- ½ cup dried rosemary
- ½ cup dried thyme
- ¼ cup dried marjoram
- ¼ cup dried oregano
- ¼ cup dried savory
- 2 tablespoons dried lavender leaves
- 2 tablespoons dried fennel seeds or stalks



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Recipes generally tell us how to prepare our herbs. Examples include mince, dice, chop, or whole leaf. If no directions are given, it is common to mince or finely chop the herbs. Mincing causes more of the herb's flavor to be exposed. This can be done with a sharp knife or by using a pair of kitchen scissors to snip the herbs.

The timing of the addition of fresh herbs during recipe preparation depends on the herb being used and if the dish being prepared is hot or cold. For hot dishes, fresh herbs are added near the end of the cooking time or just before serving to retain their flavor and aroma. Delicate herbs such as basil, cilantro, and dill should be added during the last one to two minutes of cooking or right before the dish is served. Less delicate herbs including rosemary and thyme can be added during the last 20 minutes of cooking. For some cooking processes, the herbs are added toward the beginning. Most recipes indicate the best time to add herbs.

For cold dishes such as salads, dips, dressings, and various desserts, the herbs should be added several hours before serving or overnight.

Common Herb and Food Combinations

Each herb has its own unique flavor but can add zest to a variety of different foods. Below is a list of common herb and food combinations. Remember, this list is only a guideline—once you become familiar with these and other herbs, feel free to try your own combinations!



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Basil—Tomato products (juice, pasta sauces, pizza sauce, etc.), eggs, game meats, lamb, veal, rice, spaghetti, vinaigrette, soups (minestrone, pea, potato, and vegetable), beans, eggplant

Thyme—Eggs, game meats, lamb, veal, rice, poultry, barbeque sauce, fish, oysters, chowders, soups (onion, tomato, and vegetable), mushrooms, tomatoes

Rosemary – Dumplings, eggs, game meats, lamb, veal, poultry, fish, barbeque sauce, chicken, beef, soups (pea and vegetable), beans, mushrooms, potatoes, cauliflower, turnips

Oregano—Tomato dishes, beef, game meats, veal, spaghetti, clams, soups (bean, minestrone, and tomato), beans, eggplant, and mushrooms

Dill—Tomato dishes, yeast breads, eggs, coleslaw, potato salad, fish, beans, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, cucumber, summer squash

Parsley—Salads, vegetables, pastas

Sage—Cottage cheese, game meats, pork, rice, poultry, soups (chicken, minestrone, and vegetable), stuffing

Cilantro—Mexican and Asian cooking, rice, salsa, tomatoes

Mint—Desserts, lamb, peas, fruit salads, sauces

Recipes Using Herbs

Fresh herbs can be used in a variety of dishes to enhance the flavor without the addition of extra salt, sugar, or fat. Give the following recipes a try and see what you think!

Vegetable Pasta w/ Tomatoes

1 medium zucchini, washed and ends removed
1 medium onion, peeled and chopped
2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
1 tablespoon olive oil 1 tablespoon dried leaf basil, crushed
½ teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
2 cups prepared no-fat pasta sauce
1 cup chopped fresh tomatoes
8 ounces dried pasta, shape of choice
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley or basil
grated Parmesan cheese, optional

Cut zucchini in quarters lengthwise and cut into ½-inch pieces. Place zucchini, onion, garlic, and olive oil with seasonings in large, deep skillet and sauté; over MEDIUM heat until soft. Stir often. Add prepared sauce, mix well, and let simmer for 5 minutes. Stir in ½ cup chopped tomato and allow to heat thoroughly.

In a separate pot, cook pasta as directed on package. Drain well and place in large serving bowl. Add sauce and mix gently. Top with the reserved ½ cup chopped tomatoes and chopped herbs. Serve hot. (Serves 4)

Calories: 320; Fat: 5g; Sodium: 402mg



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Roasted Squash and Eggplant Casserole with Chicken

1 medium eggplant
1½ tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
1 fresh lemon, juiced
4 cloves garlic
1 teaspoon fresh parsley
black pepper, to taste
½ cup fresh basil, chopped
2 medium size chicken breasts, pre-cooked and cubed
1 cup canned tomato sauce

Preheat oven to 350°F. Slice squash and eggplant lengthwise. In a bowl mix the oil, vinegar, lemon juice, garlic, parsley, black pepper. Brush squash and eggplant with this seasoning mixture. Grill vegetables for two to three minutes on each side, or roast them in the oven under the broiler. Arrange squash, eggplant, basil, and chicken in an 8" x 8" cooking dish and cover with tomato sauce. Bake 20 to 30 minutes, or until thoroughly heated. (Serves 4)

Calories: 170; Fat: 7g; Sodium: 492mg



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Cherry Stuffed Grilled Chicken

1½ cups pitted and coarsely chopped fresh sweet cherries (if fresh cherries are not available use frozen cherries; thaw in refrigerator the day before and drain excess liquid)
¼ cup chopped onion
1 teaspoon chopped fresh sage
½ teaspoon each salt and chopped fresh thyme
4 boneless, skinless chicken breast halves (4 to 6 ounces each)
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
1½ teaspoons garlic salt
½ teaspoon coarsely ground pepper

Combine cherries, onion, sage, salt and thyme; mix well. Cut a pocket on the thicker side of each chicken breast;

sprinkle lightly with salt if desired. Stuff ¼ of the cherry mixture into each pocket; close opening with metal skewers or wooden picks. Combine oil, vinegar, garlic salt, and pepper; mix well. Marinate stuffed chicken breasts ½ hour in refrigerator. Broil or grill chicken breasts, brushing with marinade, until fully cooked and juices run clear when sliced.

Oven Method: Brown the stuffed chicken in an oven-safe skillet on both sides. Bake at 375°F 12 to 15 minutes or until juices run clear. (Serves 4)

Calories: 229; Fat: 13g; Sodium: 767mg



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Fresh Tomato and Pita Chip Salad

Dressing

4 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
2 tablespoons grated lemon rind
4 teaspoons chopped fresh mint
1 cup thinly sliced green onions
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
¼ teaspoon salt

Salad

1 pound romaine lettuce, shredded (about 6 cups)
2 to 3 medium fresh tomatoes, cubed (about 3 cups)
1 cucumber, peeled, quartered lengthwise, and thinly sliced
2 whole wheat pitas (6½ inches diameter)

For dressing, combine parsley, lemon rind, mint, and green onions with olive oil and salt in small bowl. Mix well and let stand at least one hour. Meanwhile, combine lettuce,

tomatoes, and cucumber in a large bowl; refrigerate to chill. Preheat oven to 400°F.

Arrange pitas in a single layer on baking sheet. Bake six minutes, or until lightly toasted. Break into bite-sized pieces and set aside. When ready to serve, add pita chips to salad mixture and toss with dressing. (Serves 3)

Calories: 241; Fat: 6g; Sodium: 453mg



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Green Beans and Potatoes

1 pound red potatoes
¼ cup olive oil
1 tablespoon chopped garlic
1½ tablespoons finely chopped rosemary
1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
¼ teaspoon red chili flakes
1 pound green beans, trimmed and blanched
2 teaspoons lemon juice
Salt



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Simmer potatoes until tender; drain and cool. Quarter the potatoes lengthwise and set aside. In large sauté pan heat oil, add garlic and sauté for 30 seconds. Add rosemary, lemon zest, and chili flakes; sauté until fragrant. Add potatoes and beans; sauté until vegetables are hot and coated with seasonings. Sprinkle with lemon juice and season lightly with salt. Serve warm. (Serves 3)

Calories: 317; Fat: 19g; Sodium: 416mg

Creamy Blueberry Shake

2 cups blueberries, fresh or frozen (washed and sorted, if fresh)

2 small bananas, ripe

⅓ cup honey

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1½ cups low-fat vanilla yogurt

1 cup low-fat vanilla ice cream

4 sprigs mint

Combine blueberries, bananas, honey and lemon juice and purée on HIGH speed in blender. Add yogurt and ice cream and blend until thick and smooth. Serve immediately in cold glasses decorated with sprigs of mint. (Serves 3)

Calories: 423; Fat 4g; Sodium 108mg



Credits: baibaz/iStock/Thinkstock.com

*Recipes from <https://healthysd.gov/fruits-veggies-more-matters/>

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Fruits and Veggies: More Matters <https://healthysd.gov/fruits-veggies-more-matters/>