

WESTERN RESERVE HERB SOCIETY GUIDELINES FOR HARVESTING AND DRYING CULINARY HERBS¹

CUTTING

There is a peak time for cutting most herbs for drying purposes. This occurs just before the plant comes into flower, because at this point the volatile oil content in the plant tissue is at its highest. Herbs are best cut after two full days of sunshine and in the morning after the dew has dried on the foliage. Fully grown leaves should be selected for harvest; immature leaves are too tender to dry well. They turn black, especially in the case of basil. Cutting plants back one-third to two-thirds of their height will make possible a second and perhaps a third harvest later in the season. Speed in all steps, particularly cutting, is essential, since the cut herbs begin to lose freshness quickly. Gentle handling of the plants is important. They should not be stacked nor placed in plastic bags since both generate heat, which causes rapid deterioration. An open weave basket is good for gathering herbs. If cut herbs must be transported some distance, place the stems in lukewarm water to prevent wilting.

WASHING

Gentle and rapid handling is again essential. Use cool water to loosen dirt. Sometimes more than three or four rinses are needed for thorough cleaning. Never use hot or very cold water, and always remove the herbs promptly from the rinse water just as soon as they are clean. Removing water from the plants after washing can be done by placing them on a terry cloth towel and patting lightly, or by using a towel in conjunction with an automatic, top load washer. In the latter method, the herbs are loosely laid lengthwise on the towel, with its sides then folded over them. Place the towel around the outer side of the washer drum. The last spin setting is then used for up to one minute.

STRIPPING *before drying*

Herb leaves which can be stripped from plant stems *before drying* are those of basil, dill, lemon balm, lemon verbena, lovage, mints, parsley, sage, and tarragon. The leaves are placed in single layers on drying racks.

STRIPPING *after drying*

Herbs to be stripped *after drying* are lavender, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, summer and winter savory, and thyme. Inspection is important to locate and remove any plant stems.

DRYING

The drying procedure depends on the humidity. In humid conditions, both natural drying and oven crisping are needed. In less humid conditions, natural drying is sufficient. The drying process requires easily built racks made of square or rectangular wood frames covered with nylon net, muslin, or

¹ The requirements for harvesting, drying, freezing and storing herbs for potpourri, wreaths and other non-culinary uses should be discussed with the Drying Committee and the appropriate Herb Fair Chair. (For instance, some flower petals cannot easily be washed.) As with culinary herbs, after dry and crisp to the touch, all material should be placed in a paper bag and stored in the freezer for three (3) days.

cheesecloth. Metal or plastic screens may be used with a layer of cloth or paper towels between the screen and the herbs. The racks are raised as high as possible in the drying area to permit air circulation above and below them. When dry the herbs are removed immediately from the racks. If allowed to stay longer they may absorb moisture in the air, reducing their quality and flavor. In humid conditions, additional crisping of the herbs in an oven is necessary. When removed from the racks, the herbs are spread thinly on trays and placed in the oven at 125 degrees F. After a few minutes, they are "cornflake-dry" and ready for stripping (if still on the stem), freezing and storing. For leaves stripped before drying: although the leaves are dry the stems might still contain moisture, since they are heavier. Such stems stored with dry leaves will cause the leaves to become limp. This condition, though not always visible, will be noticeable when the storage container is opened, for it produces an undesirable musty aroma.

FREEZING

All dried herbs should be placed in paper bags and stored in the freezer (zero degrees F.) for three (3) days to kill any critters that might still be left behind. If this process is not done with **all** dried herbal material, you run the risk of contaminating the entire batch, including other material with which it comes into contact.

LABELING

At each stage of processing, correct labeling of collected herbs is essential. This should include date of harvest, herb name, stripped or not stripped, and frozen or not frozen.

STORING

Glass containers with screw tops are best for storing. The usual shelf life of whole-leaf herbs properly stored and kept in a dark, dry place is six months in whole-leaf form and one to three months if crushed or ground. After this they begin to lose potency, color and fragrance.

HARVESTING HINTS

Basil: Cut throughout growing season until the cool nights of September. Plant then becomes flavorless.

Dill weed and seed: Dill weed is at its best when florets are newly opened. Cut along with the tender green leaves. Seeds have a distinctive flavor and are gathered when the plant is fully matured.

Lavender flowers: Harvest in late June, just before the buds come into bloom.

Lemon balm: Late May through June is best time for cutting.

Lemon verbena: Harvest mid-summer, and again before the first frost.

Loveage: Best quality from plants harvested late May and June. Fair in fall.

Marjoram: Cut throughout the growing season just as shoot breaks into bud.

Oregano: Cut just as the buds set.

Parsley: Best variety for drying is Italian Flat. Good throughout the season.

Rosemary: Cut throughout the growing season.

Sage: Throughout the season. Dries fast with good color in September.

Summer savory: Best harvest is just as it begins to set buds.

Tarragon: Begin harvest in mid to late June. Handle leaves gently as they bruise easily. Remove all flower stems to keep productive.

Thyme: The first cutting, before it blooms in June, is the choicest. May be harvested all season. *Do not cut later than September 15 -- the plant must become reestablished before going into the winter season.*²

Winter savory: Gather in late May and early June. Very strong flavor.

² ***This is true of all perennial herbs.***