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How Best to Dry Culinary Herbs

By Faith Swanson and Lois Ehlenfeldt

Can you imagine cutting a handful of rosemary in June and taking it from its storage jar in January nearly as fragrant and savory as the day you cut it? The early method of drying herbs for culinary purposes was simple: the herbs were cut, bunched, and hung from kitchen rafters or near open fireplaces. When dry, they had changed to a brown color and had lost most of their flavor. In contrast, the method developed by the Western Reserve Herb Society primarily to produce packaged herbs for sale at its annual Herb Fair assures herbs of the almost cutting-day fragrance and taste months after they are stored. The secrets of this method are speed and meticulous handling. This method best preserves the flavorful potency of the essential oils, which begins to diminish the moment the plants are cut. Hence it is important that that they be processed promptly after cutting. A good rule: run; don't walk, with cut herbs.

The process requires specific conditions. First, the drying area should be clean and free of dust. Second, the drying area should be dark, well-ventilated, with low humidity, and ideally a temperature range of 70-90 degrees F., definitely no higher than 100 degrees. If closed against the night air, an attic often meets these requirements. Dark air-conditioned rooms are perfect. Herbs should never be dried in the sun or a hot oven. Heat may hasten the drying, but it is detrimental to the color and flavor of herbs.

Cutting

There is a peak time for cutting most herbs for drying purposes. This occurs just before the plant comes to 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, and they should not be stacked. Stacking and plastic bags are to be avoided, since both generate heat, which causes rapid deterioration. An openweave basket is good for gathering cut herbs. The size of the drying area will determine the size of the harvest. If cut herbs must be transported some distance, place the stems in water to prevent wilting.

Washing

Gentle and rapidly handling is again essential. Some herbs are more easily washed while on the plant stems. Use cool water to loosen dirt and soil. 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 in conjunction with an automatic washer. In the latter method, the herbs are loosely laid lengthwise on the towel, with its sides then folded over them. Picking up the towel at the ends keep the herbs orderly and makes it easy to place the towel around the outer side of the washer drum. The last

spin setting on the dial is used, for one to two minutes. With the water removed, the herbs are ready for the next step.

Stripping

Herb leaves which can be stripped from plant stems before drying, thus saving time and space, are those of basil, dill, celery, lemon balm, lemon verbena, lovage, parsley, sage, spearmint, and tarragon. The leaves are placed in single layers on drying racks. Herbs to be stripped after drying are lavender, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, winter, and summer savory, and thyme. Stripping of these herbs is done with the fingers, never a tool, and with the utmost care.

Drying

The drying procedure depends upon the humidity. In a humid climate, both natural drying and oven crisping are needed. In less humid climates, natural drying is sufficient. The drying process requires easily built racks made of square or rectangular wood frames covered with nylon net, muslin, or cheesecloth. Metal screens may be used with a layer of cloth between the screen and herbs. The racks are raised as high as possible in the drying room 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 from the air, reducing their quality and flavor. In humid climates additional crisping of the herbs in an oven is necessary. When removed from the racks, the herbs are spread thinly on trays (cookie sheets) and placed in the oven at 125 degrees f. After a few minutes they are “cornflake-dry” and ready for freezing (3 days) and storing.

Storing

At this point inspection is important to locate and remove any plant stems. Although the leaves are dry, the stems might still contain moisture, since they are heavier. Such stems stored with dry leaves in an airtight container will cause the leaves to become limp. This condition, though not always visible, is noticeable when the container is opened, for it produces an undesirable musty aroma. Glass containers with screw tops are best for storing. The usual shelf life of herbs properly stored and kept in a dark place is one year. After this, they may begin to lose color and fragrance.

Harvesting Hints

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

Celery. Harvest leaves at its peak. The plant quickly resumes growth, permitting additional cutting through rest of season.

Dill weed and seed. Dill weed is at its best when florets are newly opened. Cut them 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.

Lovage. 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 bud sets.

Parsley. Best variety for drying is Italian. Good throughout season.

Rosemary. Cut throughout the growing season.

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

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

Thyme. The first cutting, before it blooms in June, is the choicest. May be harvested all season. Do not cut later than September 15th, for the plant must become reestablished before going into the winter season. This is true of all perennial herbs.

Winter savory. Gather in late May and early June.

Do-It-Yourself Mixes

Beef: 1 part marjoram, 2 parts thyme

Chicken: 1 part each marjoram, thyme, lovage, summer savory.

Veal: 1 part each thyme and summer savory.

Meat Loaf: 1 part each thyme, lovage and 2 parts basil and 1 bay leaf.

Air-Drying Material for Arrangements

By Eleanor Donley

Country roadsides in the fall are bordered by a tapestry of warm, mellow colors, colors more subtle and muted than those usually found in a cultivated garden. These colors can be retained in dried winter bouquets. To obtain a variety of the most interesting plant material, it is necessary to start your collection in early summer. Drying blooms and seed heads by hanging is by far the easiest method, and a surprising number of plants can be effectively preserved in this way.

There are a few procedures that are important. Most flowers should be picked before the bloom is fully open, for the flower will be stronger and the color more intense. A few must be picked in bud, particularly joe-pye weed, strawflowers, and ammobium. All stems must be stripped of foliage, then assembled in bunches of a dozen or so, and secured with an elastic band. These bunches should be hung head down from a line with a plastic tie or florist wire. The elastic around each bunch will hold the stems as they shrink while drying. If stems and flowers are large, put fewer in each bunch. Be sure air can circulate among the hanging bunches. The stems of a few varieties will reabsorb moisture even after complete drying: the stem will bend and the flower will droop. This is especially true of strawflowers and ammobium. Such stems can be either reinforced or replaced with florist wire, but it must be done before drying begins. Form a very small hook at one end of the wire, push the other end through the center of the flower, and pull the wire through until the hook becomes imbedded in the flower center.

The drying room is very important. Attics in summer are usually ideal – warm, dry and dark, but furnace rooms, bedrooms, and sometimes closets and even garages can be used. Bear in mind that sun or bright light will fade flowers, and that

dampness can cause mildew. Unless the weather is humid, your material should be ready to arrange in about two weeks. It can be packed gently in boxes until needed.

The time for harvesting seed stalks and the many decorative grasses is variable. Grasses can be picked either green or brown and will usually retain their color. Seed pods, also vary: that of the iris, for example, must be left until brown in the fall, for if picked green, it will shrivel. The columbine seed heads will retain their color if picked green, or, if left on the plant to mature, will turn a light tan. By collecting the same variety of seed stalk at various stages you will find subtle color changes which are truly lovely. The common dock, for instance, is a greenish-pink in early summer and gradually changes to deep rust in the fall. There are many plants with which to experiment. It is well to remember that seeds will naturally scatter themselves when ripe, so if you would like to retain seeds in their pods, they must be picked before ripening.

The following is a list of plants, both wild and cultivated, which are suitable for air-drying. The collection times are for northeastern Ohio, but can be adjusted for other areas by following the succession:

June

Allium (albopitosum), seed head

Astible, blossom and seed head

Boneset, pick before flowers open in late June or early July

Chive, blossom before fully open

Cattail, start picking in late June

Grasses, when starting to flower

Joe-pye weed, before buds open, late June or early July

Yarrow, blossom, both wild and cultivated

July

Artemisias, gray foliage, several varieties Allium, leek and garlic heads

Ammobium, pick before yellow center shows

Baptisia, blue-gray seed pods

Baby's breath, flowers

Bergamot, flowers

Blue salvia, flowers

Columbine, seed heads

Dill, flowers and green seed head

Dock, seed stalk

Echinops, flower heads before bud appear

Fennel, flower and seed heads

Gas plant, green seed heads

Grasses, in bloom or seed

Iron weed, pick in bud

Lamb's ear, blossom head but remove all blooms

Lavender, flowers

Oregano, flowers

Pearly everlasting, flowers

Peppergrass, seed stalks

Poppy, pods, all sizes

Rabbit foot clover, seed heads

Statice, flowers

Sea lavender, flowers

Teasel, green before bloom or brown later

Thistle, Canada and bull, flowers

Vervain, flowers

Yarrow, flower

August

Artemisia, foliage

Butterfly weed, seed pods

Chinese lantern, orange lanterns

Cockscomb, flowers

Dusty miller, foliage

Globe amaranth, flowers

Goldenrod, pick green in bud and in flower

Honesty, seed disks

Love-in-a-mist, green seed heads

Moth mullein, seed stalks

Santolina, gray foliage

Selfheal, seed stalk

Sedges, seed heads

Stokesia, green seed heads

Strawflower, flowers

Sumac, seed heads

Tansy, flowers

September

Bittersweet, berries

Bayberry, berries

Hydrangea, dry flowers

Iris, seed pods

Milkweed, seed pods

Ostrich ferns, stiff brown spore fronds

Primrose, common evening, seed stalks

Senna, seed pods

Sensitive fern, stiff brown spore fronds

Capturing the Elusive Bloom

By Lois Ehlenfeldt

Throughout history, flower lovers have tried various methods of preserving flowers, not always with predictable results. Today drying flowers is no longer a haphazard, guesswork thing, but a well-defined procedure based on improved materials and techniques. Even today, however, mysteries remain concerning flower preservation, and these create a challenge which increases our pleasure in a good result.

Using what we do know, we can capture the vivid colors of a summer garden for enjoyment throughout the seasons. The design possibilities for dried material are unlimited. The lovely Williamsburg bouquets, rich in texture and color, call for an abundance of dried materials. In contrast, the clean lines of Oriental and contemporary designs can be created with very little material. In addition to

arrangements, there are wreaths, door swags, mobiles, pictures, corsages, and package and holiday decorations with which to work.

Acquiring material to process is not a serious problem. Flowers are available in season from garden, field, and roadside, and branches may be cut from garden shrubs and woodland trees. Capturing the elusive bloom is a joy and a delight. The most successful methods of holding it in captivity are now to be described.

The mechanics of drying flowers are much the same whether using sand, borax mixture, or silica gel. Place several inches of drying medium in a container with a flat bottom, putting the flowers either head up or down. If up, wire flowers in advance. Pour more of the mixture lightly over and around the petals until completely covered and bare stems remain. In doing this be careful that the flower retains its shape. Place in a dry, well-ventilated area until dry. To test for dryness, gently remove and touch a flower. If dry, carefully dust off the mixture that may cling to the flower with a camel's-hair brush. Store in tin or jars with tight covers in a dark dry area until needed.

Wiring

A 20-gauge wire is best for small flowers and 18-gauge for larger ones. The wire may replace the flower stem or be used along with it. Flowers such as marigolds and zinnias have sturdy stems and do not need to be wired. The everlastings have soft stems and should be wired, as the necks tend to wilt in humid weather. Insert the wire through the neck and come up through the center of the bloom. Make a small hook of the wire, and bring it down gently into the flower head. This will take a bit of practice to achieve a "nothing-has-happened" look. Make sure the beauty of the flower is not disturbed; then cut the wire to the desired length. The everlastings send forth their blows "fresh dried". All that needs doing to prepare them for use is to wire their stems. These include the strawflowers, statice, ammobium, rhodanthe, catananche, and Jobe's tears with its silvery-gray pods.

Borax mixture

Borax mixtures are made of two parts borax and one part of either white corn meal or sand. Follow the mechanics for drying flowers, using an open box (shoe box is ideal). Make sure flowers are free of all moisture, as borax clings to damp areas

and is difficult to remove from a dried flower. Borax can be used alone, but is more satisfactory when used in a mixture flowers to be dried in borax mixtures are ageratum, butterfly weed, Christmas rose, clematis, coleus (leaves), cornflower, feverfew, gas plant, goldenglow, hollyhock, lantana, larkspur, lily-of-the-valley, marigold, pansy, passion flower, physostegia, roses, viburnum, yarrow, and zinnia.

Sand

An inert material, sand has no reaction on or with the flower substance. It does not excessively dehydrate the flowers, which keep a nearly natural appearance. Sand does not cling to surfaces unless they are hairy or sticky, as in the case of the petunia stem. The two types of sand recommended are oolite sand from the Great Salt Lake and white play sand. Oolite is composed of small grains of carbonate-coated brine shrimp eggs. The carbonate coating aids color retention and prevents acidic burning. The grains are rounded; those of other types of sand and desiccants are angular and may cause pitting and abrasion of flower surfaces. Oolite sand can be had from Flower preservations, P.O. Box 1543, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84110. White play sand, sold for children's play boxes is widely available. For sand drying try the flowers suggested under borax mixtures, plus cosmos, delphinium, marguerite, and stock.

Silica gel

Silica gel is not a gel at all, but a very thin thirsty chemical made from sodium silicate and sulfuric acid. It forms a jelly-like mass during one stage of its manufacture, hence the name. As a finished product, it looks and feel like ordinary table salt. It can absorb up to forty percent of its weight in water vapor. Preparations made for flower drying contain a granule which turns from bright blue to pale pink when the silica gel has absorbed its capacity of moisture. It should then be dried in an oven at 250 degrees until the blue color reappears. Because silica gel is lightweight, stress on the crisp petals is reduced during the uncovering process, and the flowers are more easily removed without damage. Good clear color results because of the rapid dehydration, and also better substance, texture, and stability. Daffodils, pansies, hyacinths, orchids, and rhododendrons dry beautifully in silica gel, but will have a thin, translucent appearance when dried in other media.

In working with this medium, follow the procedures for drying flowers, using a tin box with a tight-fitting cover. Seal the cover with a tape to keep out moisture, and set aside to dry. Drying time varies from three days for delicate flowers to five days for heavier ones. The dryness of the silica gel also affects drying time. When dry, gently pour off and remove all traces of gel from the flower surface. A gentle hand is needed here, for the flowers will be very dry and brittle. Store in airtight containers to which three tablespoons of silica gel have been added. Flowers dried in silica gel will remain beautiful only if kept in heated or air-conditioned rooms. Excessive humidity causes them to become limp and shapeless.

Almost every flower will dry in silica gel. Try alyssum, bells of Ireland, balloon flower, blackberry lily, lupine, orchid, Queen Anne's lace, snapdragon, toadflax, viola, and wild yarrow.

Glycerin

This method is used for preserving many kinds of foliage, which will remain pliable indefinitely and can be used in any type of arrangement. Though the form and texture of the leaves are retained when the glycerin solution is absorbed, the color changes, and they take on beautiful shades of tan, brown, plum, black, and gold. Use a solution of one-third glycerin and two-thirds water. Crush the end of the stem or branch, and place in the solution, submerging only the crushed end. Always use freshly cut material, and place in the solution as quickly as possible after picking. When processing woody branches, use only the mature foliage. If wilting takes place, remove foliage, and try to revive it by placing it in warm water for a few hours. If it does not revive, discard the materials, and start over. For softer material, such as dock and goldenrod, process at the peak of bloom and for a much shorter time. The time of year, condition of the material, and maturity of the plant affects the length of the process. Wood material takes five days to three weeks, and softer materials two to four days.

The material should be checked for color changes; maintain the level of the glycerin solution as the material absorbs it. When the solution has reached the upper leaves, and color changes have occurred in the entire leaf, or when the flower has become pliable, the material is ready to use. Do not leave materials in the solution absorption has been completed. Glycerin is costly, but a relatively

inexpensive grade can be bought in drug stores. It is well to buy in gallon quantities, for the glycerin solutions can be reused. If mold forms, strain and heat to boiling point, cool, and reuse. Glycerin preparation is very effective for the leaves of baptisia, barberry, bayberry, beech, boxwood, euonymus, forsythia, laurel, leucothoe, pear, Russian olive, and viburnum.

Pressing flowers

The best way to preserve flowers for bookmarks, pictures, place mats, stationery, or decoration of any other flat surface is by pressing. Lay the flowers or leaves between the pages of a large book (a telephone directory is good) or in a plant press. This method is very simple, and pleasant surprises await the experimenter with different kinds of flowers, especially the field flowers. Use them en masse to create a lovely effect. Try dozens of purple violets under a glass table top, or make a flat bouquet of bright shiny buttercups in a picture with a yellow velvet mat. A few flowers suitable for pressing are alyssum, blackberry blossoms, buttercup, evening primrose, all kinds of fern, Queen Anne's lace, pansies, single roses, and strawberry blossoms.

Air-drying leaves

Press leaves carefully between layers of paper on a flat surface. Hold them down with a rug or a board to keep them flat until dry. When ready to use, the leaves can be shaped with steam from a boiling kettle. Steaming plant material to create a pleasing line can be done only with air-dried specimens.

One Way to Make an Herbal Wreath

By Mary Killmeyer

Use a wire wreath frame. These are available in 8-12-14-16-18 and 20 inch sizes. The plant material should be gathered the day you plant to make the wreath, if at all possible. If the material must be cut a day ahead, place stems in water so that will be firm when ready to use. Sort the material by quality, laying aside the best plant tops, seed heads, and leaves for the top layer, done last.

Stuffing the frame

To begin, stuff the cavity of the frame with the least attractive material, curving and bending it to fit the inner circle of the frame. Make sure the stuffing is distributed and solidly packed, so that it will be full and tight when dry. Suggested materials for stuffing the frame include Artemisia annua, A. vulgaris, A.abrotanum, goldenrod, or sweet clover. Wrap the stuffed frame with nylon or heavy cotton thread leaving up to one inch spaces between the threads in which to insert the decorative top layer.

Making the face of the wreath

Carry on with the wreath by inserting the best materials between the threads (tweezers are helpful) until the entire face of the wreath is packed tightly, so that it will have enough fullness when dried. Suggested materials for the wreath face include Artemisia absinthium, A. pontica, silver mound, goldenrod, sage, joe-pye weed, oregano flowers, or Senecio cineraria. Since your wreath is now taking its final shape, take care to insure that it will look well designed. Here are some ways to enhance the design: use open and closed seed heads, or open and flowers and buds from the same plant for interesting texture. As you work around the circle, be sure the heads of the material are pointed in the same direction. Place short sprays of foliage in a circle around wreath. Frequently the type of material used will itself suggest a design.

Trimming and drying

The wreath is now ready to trim and dry. Trim may be added before or after drying. Affix trim to wreath with florist's wire. A kitchen wreath might be trimmed with a small ribbon bow, herbs, spices, nuts or pods, while a more formal wreath for a dining room might have a fuller ribbon bow and dried flowers. Trim colors should be chosen to complement a room. Suggested materials for trimming include strawflowers, tansy, yarrow, lavender, teasel, allium, globe amaranth, cinnamon sticks, cardamom pods, bay leaves, sprigs of rosemary, small red peppers, and dried berries.

To dry the wreath, place it in a dry, dark, well-ventilated area for four to six weeks. At the end of this time it will be ready for display. For convenience in hanging the wreath, attach a small loop of wire to the rear of the frame.

Recipe for Potpourri

By Elizabeth Scher

Making potpourri is not as simple as most enthusiastic articles would have you believe, the major difficulty being the procurement of materials. The rose petals are the single most important ingredient, and should always make up at least half of the sachet bulk. Most of the modern roses, hybrid teas, floribundas, and the like, do not make good potpourri, for scent has been sacrificed to size, color, and ever-blooming characteristics. A few modern roses do have a good scent, and Chrysler Imperial is my favorite of these. The season of the old-fashioned roses is all too short, and June is a notoriously hectic time of year, but the fine scents of the old roses make them most desirable for your purposes. The next difficulty is finding the orrisroot, gum benzoin, and perfume oils necessary to finish the product. These are most easily obtained from a friendly druggist or herbal supply house. If, having been forewarned, you still want to make some potpourri; here is how you go about **it**.

You must have a source of fragrant roses and be able to harvest fresh, full-blown flowers almost daily. It is very difficult to force oneself to harvest blossoms at the peak of their beauty, but old faded flowers do not have the scent of fresh ones. The freshly gathered petals, which have been gently stripped from the calyx, are dried in a warm airy room away from sunshine. A well ventilated attic is ideal. Spread the petals on old window screens, or, if these are not available, on paper. If the latter is used, the petals should be shuffled about every day to expose all sides to the air. They will shrink to less than half their bulk, and are ready when they are “dry as cornflakes”. Store thoroughly dry petals in some sort of airtight container. Watch them, and sift through them every now and then to be sure they are keeping their crispness. Small bits of desiccant, designed to keep medicines dry, can

sometimes be obtained at drug stores. These are excellent for use in your storage container to insure dryness.

At the ends of the rose blooming season, measure the petals you have dried, and make plans for additives. Most recipes base their proportions on quarts of petals. As the season progresses, other flowers and fragrant leaves will become available. Lavender flowers are a happy addition, as well as lemon scented leaves, especially those of lemon verbena, though one must wait until the end of the season to harvest these leaves in any quantity. The leaves of the rose geranium are good also, with the best scent found in the big base leaves, not the tips. Be sure to wash away any mud before drying them, and strip off the stems, as they are hard to dry and are unattractive in the mix. Lemon balm does not keep its scent very well, and mint often had a poor reaction to other scents, but lemon grass, dried tips of rosemary, and the blossoms of Monarda didyma are all good.

In making potpourri, fixatives are added to the petals to help retain the scents. Orrisroot is the best known, but I have had excellent results with gum benzoin Sumatra. Here you must use what you are able to procure. If you are using leaves which are not ready until the end of the season, sprinkle the rose petals with fixative as they are measured. If your mixture is to be mostly roses and lavender, the spices, fixative, and perfume oils can be mixed and added at one time. May E. Baer in her article "pot-Pourri Album" in Herbs for Use and Delight suggests that these ingredients can be mixed together with just enough of the oils to make the mass "like dampened cornmeal" which sounds like an excellent idea. I have usually added fixatives as I went along, then the crushed or powdered cinnamon and cloves, and, weeks later, the oils. However one proceeds, the oil must be added to the mixture at least a month before the mixture is to be used, or else it will not be sufficiently absorbed, and will stain cloth bags or the insides of glass containers.

Oil of rose geranium is the best substitute for the true rose oil, which is practically worth its weight in gold. Mrs. Baer suggests that you try to get a few drops of four other flower scent oils, perhaps jasmine, orange flower, lavender, or lemon verbena, into your mixture. Toss all together, and keep in an airtight contain. Turn the mixture over at intervals so that everything is well combined. After a month's

time, the mixture can be arranged in covered jars or sewn into sachet bags. The recipe which appears here is one the Western Reserve Herb Society has used in preparing potpourri products for its annual Herb Fair.

Basic Dry Potpourri

4 quarts	dry rose petals
4 cups	dry lavender flowers
2 to 4 cups	dry rose geranium leaves
2 to 4 cups	dry lemon scented leaves
4 tablespoons	orrisroot powder or gum benzoin
4 tablespoons	mixed spices (cinnamon, cloves, etc.)
8 drops	oil of rose geranium
8 drops	of 4 other flower oils

Bergamot-Rose Potpourri

Here is another Western Reserve Herb Society recipe for potpourri, which shows how the basic one may be altered to make a different scent.

6 cups	dry rose petals
4 cups	dry lavender flowers
1.5 cups	bergamot heads and leaves
½ teaspoon	ground cloves
½ teaspoon	ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon	ground allspice
1 tablespoon	dried orange peel, tiny pieces, no white
1 tablespoon	orrisroot, powdered
1 tablespoon	gum benzoin, powdered
10 drops	oil of bergamot

Use a gallon-size glass jar with a tight lid for mixing and storing.