

Preserving Herbs

By Janet Hackert, Nutrition Specialist

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that we use much less sodium than most of us are accustomed to using: only 1500 mg/day for about half of the U.S. population, including children, and the majority of adults. Seems like a good time to learn more about preserving and using herbs instead of salt.

Many herbs can be grown in a small quantity in a pot, or for more production, in a garden. Some herbs can even be grown indoors, given plenty of sunlight and well drained soil.

Harvesting such herbs as basil, cilantro, mint, oregano, parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme, for their leaves is typically best done when the flower stems are just beginning to open. This is when the essential oils that give them their fragrance and flavor are at their peak. It is also best to harvest herbs in the morning, just after the dew has evaporated, on a day following at least two sunny days.

Many herbs can be dried to preserve them. Place cut herbs loosely in a basket to avoid crushing leaves and damaging them. Cut perennials to about half their height and annuals to just a few inches. For herbs with larger leaves, remove the leaves from the stems after washing in cool water and patting dry. Spread the leaves out in a single layer and let dry in a dark, dry place with good air circulation. Ideal drying temperature is between 70 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Drying should take 3-4 days.

For smaller leaves, leave on the stem and hang several stems inside a brown paper bag with small holes poked in the sides for ventilation. Tie the bag closed and hang upside down, catching in the bag any of the small leaves that fall off as they dry.

Herbs can also be frozen. Harvest and wash. Blanch in boiling, unsalted water for 50 seconds, cool quickly in ice water and pat dry with paper towels. Freeze in a single layer on a cookie sheet. Once frozen, place in airtight containers or bags. Mark with contents and date.

Using herbs instead of salt can help us achieve those lower sodium recommendations.

For more information on growing and preserving herbs ask for publication [G6470 Growing Herbs at Home](#) at your local University of Missouri Extension Office, or contact me at 660-425-6434. You can also ask for the handout, "Instead of Salt...Use Herbs and Spices" from your local MU Extension office for ideas on using herbs in everyday meal preparation.

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