



Senior Series

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Spice Up Your Life with Herbs

Herbs have been used in cooking for thousands of years. Although early records reveal that they were used for medicinal purposes, primitive man also used herbs to disguise the taste of spoiled meat and to improve the flavor of dull foods.

Interest in various ethnic cuisines has prompted renewed interest in cooking with herbs. Many cultures use herbs in place of salt in cooking. Although sodium has an important role in the body, too much can be harmful. High sodium intake has been linked to high blood pressure (hypertension). Herbs do not contain calories or fat and can be used in place of margarine or butter.

Is it an herb or spice?

Many people use the terms herb and spice interchangeably. Culinary

herbs grow in temperate regions and are non-woody plants whose leaves are used to season foods. They are green, used in small amounts and may be in fresh or dried forms. Spices grow in tropical regions, are dried, and come from the root, bark, seeds, buds, berry, or fruit of plants and trees. They are usually brown, black, or red and may be used whole or ground in powder form. Herbs are also classified as annuals, perennials, or biennials.

Cooking with herbs

Although there are no rules when cooking with herbs, here are general guidelines:

- Try experimenting using small amounts of herbs to see what you like. Start with a well-tested recipe and adjust it over time to suit individual tastes.

- Use strong herbs in small amounts. Herbs should enhance not overwhelm the flavor of food.
- As a general rule, fresh herbs should be added near the end of the cooking time.
- Dried herbs are more concentrated than fresh.
- Herbs can be used individually or blended for a variety of flavors.
- Crushing or grinding herbs provides more flavor than using them whole.
- Add whole dried herbs at the start of cooking for recipes that will cook an hour or longer, such as soups and stews.
- Crushed or ground herbs should be added 15 minutes before the end of cooking.

Substituting dried for fresh

If a recipe calls for fresh herbs but you have only dried, the general substitution equivalent is 1 teaspoon crumbled dried herbs for 1 tablespoon of fresh herbs. Approximately 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon ground dried herbs can be substituted for 1 tablespoon fresh herbs.

Purchasing and storing herbs

Dried herbs are sensitive to light, heat, air, and moisture. They

generally keep their flavor for one year. Purchase small containers until you know how much you will use. Be sure to label the container with the purchase date. To determine if a dried herb or spice is still potent, rub a small amount between your fingers. If it has a fresh aroma, it probably can be used in cooking.

Flavor and color loss can be prevented by following these guidelines:

- Buy herbs in small quantities at farmers markets, health food stores, or natural food stores. They generally sell herbs in smaller amounts than grocery stores.
- Keep dried herbs in a tightly covered container away from light, moisture, and heat.
- Most fresh herbs are perishable and bunches should be stored with their stems in water in the refrigerator.
- Loose leaves can be packed in perforated plastic bags in the refrigerator vegetable drawer. Pat excess water with a paper towel; too much moisture promotes spoilage.
- Fresh herbs can be air-dried for long-term storage by tying stems together with string and hanging them in a dark, clean, well-ventilated area.

- Freezing fresh herbs in airtight containers retains more flavor than other methods. Smaller amounts may be frozen in ice cube trays.

Don't be afraid to experiment when cooking with herbs. Once you see how simple it is to make great tasting dishes, you'll never again say, "please pass the salt!"

Sources

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By Jennifer Even, Extension Educator, Ohio State University Extension, Hamilton County.

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Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension

TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868