

# HOW TO DRY HERBS

A COMPLETE GUIDE ON DRYING HERBS



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# Introduction

Drying herbs is a rather simple process that is used to preserve herbs and make them last for a longer period of time. The effectiveness and method with which an herb can be dried will depend on many factors, including the type of herb and the time at which the fresh leaves or flowers were harvested.

Not all types of herbs will dry in the same conditions and in the same amount of time. This is one exciting part about this: you get to do trial and error and by experience alone you will become an expert in knowing what is the amount of time required for certain types of herbs to dry.

The main trick in drying herbs effectively lies on the ability of drying out all the water to prevent molding while maintaining the herb's natural oils and flavors. But you will find out that with time, you will become more and more familiar with the most effective methods for drying your own garden herbs.

A basic knowledge on what the different types of herbs are and their culinary or crafting importance goes a long way on effectively drying herbs for preservation. You must be aware of the weather, types of leaves, the thickness of the stem, even the presence of bugs in the garden. All these elements combined will make of you the best herb drier.

I created a complete guide into herb drying. It contains comprehensive descriptions of the types of herbs you can dry and the best ways of doing so. It also contains comments about why it is important to dry herbs and how to store them afterwards. This is a must read before you plan on drying herbs on a regular basis.

So, either for culinary or medicinal purposes, or for decoration or crafting, choosing the right technique for drying every different type of herb will provide great success in obtaining perfectly dried herbs.



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## What is Herb Drying?

Preserving food for later consumption has always been a concern to cooks and different methods have been devised for different types of foods. Of all these methods, drying herbs is the easiest one and one that can be easily done at home. Drying herbs at home is actually a very smart choice since dried herbs at the store can become rather costly. A great thing about drying herbs is that the methods used to do so are very simple yet very effective.

When herbs are dried, all moisture is removed and plants become impervious to yeast, mold, and bacteria without significantly losing their natural oils and nutritional properties. After the process of drying is completed, the plants can be perfectly preserved for six to twelve months.

To remove moisture from herbs, all you need is some air. Yet you need to be smart by simply drying them with the sun you can cause all their natural oils to be burned away which, of course, is an undesired result.

Herbs can be obtained at any groceries store or they can be harvested at your own garden. These need to be washed to remove any dirt or remains from other animals. Given that you bought them in a store, there is no way for you to know what they have been exposed to. If the plants have been grown organically, probably they do not need washing. Best thing is to grow them in your own backyard. They might still need some washing. The washing process should be done carefully trying not to tear the leaves of the plant.

Either for consumption or for ornamental purposes, drying herbs will effectively remove moisture from the plant. Luckily, herbs contain so little moisture that they will remain practically untouched after they have been dried. Several methods that guarantee the sole removal of moisture have been devised. They vary in types of instruments required and time for results. We will be thoroughly discussing each one of these methods as well as what are the best types for specific types of plants.



# How to Dry Herbs

There are usually three basic purposes for drying herbs.

- For food preservation.- Herbs filled with moisture are very prone to mold, yeast, and bacteria. These have the detrimental action of degrading plants and withering them fast. Removing the moisture guarantees that these pathogens do not infect the plant and are apt for human consumption.
- For medication.- The procedure is basically the same for medicinal purposes. Herbs such as basil and lavender fall into this category.
- For decoration.- Herbs that are for decorative purposes only can be dried out with certain methods that involve chemical substances that would be otherwise harmful for human consumption. Lavender is a widely used dried herb for decorative purpose, along with many other. We will get into more details later.

The main factor needed to dry herbs is a drying agent that is not excessive sun exposure or any other source of strong light. This is because if heat is too intense, it will affect the nutritional content of the herb along with the pleasant oils. Overexposing an herb to direct sunlight will cause it to bleach. The factors or instruments that can be used to do this are the wind, a paper press, an oven (carefully heated), a desiccant such as silica, or a microwave oven.

The most widely used method for drying herbs consists on placing them into a bundle and hanging them upside down to allow the wind to dry them. They are usually placed inside a paper bag. The downside of this method is that it takes some time for the herbs to dry; namely a week or so-it ultimately depends on the type of herb being dried.



## Different Methods for Drying Herbs

As expressed before, the drying method applied to herbs will vary depending on the type of plant. The main reason for this is the strength of the leaves and oil content. The amount of time that an herb must be dried and how to best dry it without compromising flavor and oil content will be determined by you through trial and error until you become an expert. But this guide is a great start into it. Some leaves are really sturdy and will retain their color even after drying. On the other hand, leaves such as mint, parsley, or lemon balm, need to be dried before they quickly catch mold.

Some general things to remember if you are harvesting your own herbs would be: Experts recommend you to harvest an herb right before it flowers, but if you want to dry along with the flowers, you can perfectly do so after they bloom. Or you can experiment with both and see which one provides you with more satisfying results. Cut them in the morning, right after all the dew has evaporated from the morning sun. Make sure to wash them thoroughly but carefully and dry them gently to prevent them from breaking or getting damaged. Once you have washed them and removed the water, you must immediately proceed to the drying process. The following are the most common methods used for drying herbs.

## Quick Drying

This is not really a method for having dried herbs but instead it refers to drying them and having them fresh right before cooking. So, this will usually take approximately an hour.

Basically, place a towel or cloth on some rack, maybe the dish rack. Lay your herbs over this towel without overlapping them. Keep them within the warmth of your kitchen. After an hour or so, you should go ahead and check if herbs are dry enough for cooking.

## Indoors Air Drying

There are actually two ways of drying herbs indoors:

Wrap bundles of herbs with a rubber band and hang them upside down somewhere ventilated inside the house. Let the air in your house dry them up. This is a process that will take at least a week.

The other way of drying them indoors is loosely placing them on some screen or rack. Place them close to a window but do not expose to direct sunlight.

The advantage of using this method for drying is that it allows the herb to keep its flavor and there is no bleaching.

## Air or Sun Drying Outdoors

As the term says, herbs can of course be dried outdoors under the sun. Now, it is important to note here that direct sunlight might bleach some herbs and totally evaporate away not only water but also its essential oils. This is why this method is not the preferred one.

To dry herbs outdoors to the sunlight, prepare several bundles of your herb and tie them up. Keep in mind that as herbs dry out they will become thinner. This means that you have to check from time to time to see if they are not too loose and make adjustments. The best option of out this though would be using a rubber band since this will tighten up itself as the stems shrink. Try not to place your plants on direct sunlight, but maybe under a shadow. Once bundles are tied, hang them upside down. Once they are hanging, as an option, you can place a paper bag (with holes to allow air circulation, of course) to protect them against bugs, dust, or any other undesired air-borne agent. Plus, the bag will collect seeds or any piece of stem that falls.

This method usually takes one or two weeks, depending on the type of herb you are drying. The herb is dry when it feels brittle and no moisture is felt.

## Oven Drying

If you do not have the time (or patience) to wait for the air and the sun do the job for you, then you can always opt for other methods. Oven drying is one of them. What you need to do is place your herbs on a cookie tray or something alike. Set your oven to the lowest temperature and place the tray with the herbs inside. Keep the door of the oven open, unless you want your herbs to overheat, burn, and crust away. You can be checking how the plants are doing by testing them from time to time. When herbs are brittle at touch, they are ready and can be removed from the oven.

In some cases, herbs will be completely dried after 20 minutes but some others will remain on the turned-off oven overnight. This, of course will depend on a plants leaf strength. Herbs dried with this method can be used for culinary and medicinal purposes.

## Microwave Oven Drying

When using the microwave oven to dry plants, it is usually done with silica gels. Silica gels are actually toxic and plants dried with this method should not be used for consumption or medication, only for ornamental purposes.

The herbs to be dried are placed in a can with silica gel pellets, which will absorb the moisture. Place the herb and the silica gel in a pan. Microwave at the lowest settings during a couple of minutes and let it rest during 10 minutes. If the herb feels dry and with no moisture it is great, otherwise, repeat the procedure until you are sure that all the herbs are dry.

## Pressing

This is probably the method you used to prepare a plant press for Science class. This method can effectively be used to drying herbs for later use. Pressed plants can later be used for decorative arts and similar. You may use a wooden table or a book. Place the plant between the two boards or books. Use rubber bands or any other pressing method. When plant is ready it will feel very thing and gracious. This can later be used for decorations.

## Using Desiccants

A desiccant is hygroscopic by nature. Hygroscopic means that it has the ability to absorb moisture from the air surrounding the herb in this case. Therefore, it makes sense that we use it to dry herbs. The most commonly used is silica gel because it can be purchased at any store. There are other desiccants that can be used though, such as sand and cornmeal.

Place the desiccant into a plastic bowl and place the herbs over it. Make sure the desiccant is surrounding most of the plant. After a few days, the herb will be very dry so you have to handle it with care. To remove excess desiccant, use a brush to clean it off; doing so with your hands will crumble the herb. Herbs dried with desiccants are not suitable for consumption so use this method only when drying herbs for crafting. Herbs for Drying



## List of Common Herbs to Dry

The following is a list of some very common herbs that can be dried along with a brief description and use of each. There is a huge amount of herbs that may be dried, some of them typical from a region. We will limit our scope to some of the most common ones and the ones that you can grow in your own garden. This should give you a better idea of what to expect when drying an herb in terms of effectiveness, time, and preservation.

# Basil

There are actually many types of basil plants, the most common for culinary purposes being: Holy basil, Thai basil, sweet basil, and lemon basil. This herb is also known as Saint Joseph's Wort. Basil is used both fresh and dry. When used fresh it is usually applied at the last stage of cooking since quick cooking will get rid of flavor. When dried, basil will lose most of its flavor. This is why if you are planning on drying basils you must know when to cut them and dry them. As with most herbs, basil plants will lose their flavor when they start flowering. Therefore, the best time to cut them is after all leaves have sprouted and before it starts flowering. Basils can be dried with air and sunlight outdoors. The leaves of basil will usually take two weeks to completely dry with this method. They can also be dried on a preheated oven, heated for around 20 minutes and allow them to stay in the oven overnight.

## Chives

Chives belong to the onion family. In fact, they are the smallest members. They have a fresh flavor that can be captured all year long by drying them. This herb finds extensive use in French cuisine and in some Swedish dishes. They provide a nice grassy and onion flavor to food. Chives can be dried on the outdoors by air. These have to be placed inside a bag to collect fallen leaves and prevent other air agents to stick to it. Chives leaves will usually take two weeks before completely drying. If you do not feel you have that kind of time, they can also be dried at the oven or a food dehydrator for faster drying. To store them, once dried, chive leaves must be chopped into small pieces and placed inside a dry empty jar.

## Curry leaf

Curry leaves are widely used for food seasoning. They are used in a variety of dishes to add flavor. They usually have a very short life span when moist. Drying them is a great way to preserve them for a long time. The best way to dry curry leaves without sacrificing most of its flavor is a quick drying using a metal pan and allowing them to rest, not to direct sunlight, but on a dry place for two to three days. This will preserve curry leaves for a much longer time and the best part is that most of its flavor is preserved and can later be used for cooking. When drying, one must make sure to remove leaves from the main stem and placing them evenly over a metal pan or platform.

## Dill

The dried ferns of dill are largely used in European and Scandinavian cuisine. Dried dill ferns will retain their flavor for as much as four months. The seeds can also be used to elaborate essential oils. The ferns of dill plant can be dried to the air, in an oven, or in a microwave oven.

## Mint leaf

There are approximately 13-18 different species of mint. It is used for teas, syrups, jellies, candies, ice-cream, and beverages. Dried mint leaves can be used for seasoning and for an aromatic tea blend. Mint must be cut right before flowers bloom. Before drying them they must be washed with cold water and completely dried. If the leaves are left in the stem, then air drying in a room with little light is the best way to go. As usual, drying will take two weeks or a little more. An oven, a microwave oven, a food heater, and a dehydrator may be also used, except it is recommended for you to place the leaves flat without them overlapping.

## Oregano

Oregano belongs to the same genus as the mint family. It is usually harvested during the spring since it grows on hot, dry climates but it does fine on other climates. Oregano leaves have a better taste when dried than when fresh. It's aromatic taste can be bitter to the tongue to the point of numbing it. To dry oregano, it is best to cut it right before it flowers and by the end of summer. If you want to air-dry oregano, tie up the stalks upside down and check them after a week. You may want to separate the leaves from the flowers once they are dried. If you want a quick drying, you can place the leaves on the stalks on a tray and into an oven set to low heat. Even though this is quicker, it will take away some flavor from the oregano.

## Thyme

This evergreen herb can be used for medicinal, culinary, and ornamental purposes. Even though the fresh version of thyme has better flavor than the dried one, this one is not more convenient since it can be stored for less than a week. However, if you wish to store it for more than that time, then you should definitively dry it. Do so by detaching the leaves from the stem, place them evenly on a dish on a dry, cool place and let them rest for several days. Check the leaves to see if they are completely dry.

## Rosemary

This Mediterranean evergreen, perennial herb has a pretty fragrant scent and is used for the flavoring of several foods such as poultry and roast meats. Rosemary is used as an ornamental herb when fresh and is also used as a pest control agent in gardens. The leaves are used for herbal teas and they are very common in Italian dishes in their dried form. Rosemary is a great choice for drying an herb mainly because it barely loses its flavor in the process. You can air-dry them indoors on a well-ventilated area. Some recommend you place a paper bag to prevent dust from accumulating and to keep direct sunlight from bleaching it. You can also use a microwave oven or a food dehydrator if you want a quick drying. Just remember to wash them evenly before drying them.

## Lavender

Lavender is also a member of the mint family. It is found in Southern Europe, north and eastern Africa, southwest Asia, India, and the Mediterranean. These plants are widely used with decorative purposes, for extraction of essential oils, and as culinary herbs. It is typically used in salads and as condiment. Lavender also has some medicinal purposes; it is widely used in aromatherapy, its infusion is used to sooth insect bites and burns. Before drying lavender, one must be careful to harvest it when its scent is strongest and color is brightest. There are two different ways in which you can dry lavender and they depend on the purpose. If you want to preserve the color of lavender, dry them tying them in bundles upside down, in a dark room. This process usually takes from two to four weeks. They can also be dried under the sun placed over a wooden board, but this will turn the flowers into a very pale purple color. However, this method is a lot faster than drying them in the dark; it will take less than a week. In both methods, to verify if the lavender is dry enough, flowers will easily crumble from the stem.

## Lemon Grass

This tropical plant is mostly used fresh but it can also be found dried and powdered. It has a scent similar to lemon and is used in cooking. It is very traditional in some southeastern Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. It is used to flavor teas, soups and meats. Before drying, you must wash and remove the leaves at the bottom. Cut the lemongrass into 3-4-inch pieces and then cut these lengthwise into thinner stems. These must be placed on an oven pan and place inside an oven at the lowest temperature. You can also sun-dry them for approximately one week.

## Catnip

Since catnip is mostly known as a treat for cats, it is not widely used for human consumption. However, it can be used to prepare a tasty home-brewed tea. In fact catnip has been historically used with medicinal purposes, uses that have declined due to the modern medicine. The best way to dry catnip is to tie it up in bundles and place them in a dark place. Avoid light exposure as this will weaken the catnip. Allow it to dry for four to eight weeks. Keep in mind that catnip will shrink as a result of losing water.

## Sage

Native to the Mediterranean, this perennial shrub has been historically used for medicinal and culinary purposes. Sage has a flavor similar to pepper. It is an essential herb in Britain, along with parsley, thyme, and rosemary. In America, it is used for stuffing the turkey for Thanksgiving Day or the chicken during Christmas. The leaves of sage are usually crushed and poured into boiling water; vapors are used to treat respiratory ailments such as asthma. The best way to dry it is placing them upside down in small bundles and inside a paper bag to keep them safe. Allow them to rest for two weeks or until it crumbles easily. If you want to have a much faster drying, use an oven or a food dehydrator. This will usually take around a couple of hours but you should be checking every now and then.

## Sorrel

Sorrel is a perennial plant that will get easily spoiled with humidity so drying for its preservation is practically necessary. Sorrel has a pretty sharp taste and is used in sauces and soups. The best way to dry them is in a warm, dark room. They can also be dried on a pre-heated oven for 15 minutes with the door half open.

## Lemon Balm

Lemon balm is a perennial herb plant of a mint family. It is native to the Mediterranean Region, central Asia, North Africa and central Europe. Lemon balm makes honor to its name since its leaves have a lemon scent. Herbal teas and ice cream are usually flavored with lemon balm, along with some spearmint. As medication, lemon balm has been used for the treatment of diseases on the liver, bile, intestines, and nervous system. Lemon balm can be dried to the air in a warm spot without direct sunlight. They can also be dried in the oven or a food dehydrator. If using the oven, it is suggested that you preheat it for 20 minutes. After that time has passed turn off the oven and place them inside for a day on a cookie tray. If they are not dry enough, repeat the procedure.

## Bay Leaves

This meat, soups, and sauces season is obtained from the evergreen Laurel tree native to the Mediterranean. The bay leaves are found in all types of food within the Mediterranean cuisine. Bay leaves are also used to soothe inflammations. It is also used in aromatherapy to treat earaches and blood pressure. Bay is also used for ornamental purposes. Bay leaves are dried to preserve them for a year. They should be cut from trees that have been up for at least two years. Leaves have a higher content of oil during midsummer, which makes it the perfect time for harvesting them. Gently detach the leaves from the tree early in the morning after the dew has evaporated. These delicate leaves are better dried using the natural method or even on a dehydrator. Leaves that are placed on a well ventilated area away from direct sunlight will usually take two weeks to dry completely.



# The importance of Drying Herbs

When leaves of plants are crushed, the oils in them evaporate into the air. These oils are the ones that give herbs their distinct flavor and properties. Therefore, using fresh herbs guarantees that the substance in the herb will be harnessed at its maximum. However, sometimes you need to preserve these plants in order to use them later. One thing you could do is to just keep buying dried herbs on the market. However, a more eco-friendly and healthier move would be to harvest your own herbs and then preserve them yourself.

Herbs are plants and as such they are prone to mold, yeast, bacteria, and several other environmental factors. Therefore, they must be handled properly in order to keep their essence. Drying them does remove some of the flavor and properties that they have when fresh. However, they are preserved and still make pretty good additives and condiments for food and for medication. A typical fresh herb will last a couple of weeks, maybe more if preserved well. But a dried herb will last for many more weeks, even months. So, it is important that you master the techniques required for the drying of herbs and which ones work for which types of herbs.

Always keep in mind that the best school is experience and this is usually gained by trying things that will not always work. As you keep doing trial and error, you will become an expert in knowing which procedures are best suitable for your plant and how much time should you wait for a particular herb.



## Herbs after Being Dried

Once you have dried your herbs, it is also important to decide where you are going to store them. Storage is important because the idea is that they do not regain moisture or collect dirt. So consider these tips on how to store your dried herbs after you have dried them:

Use a sealed bag (such as a Zip bag) or an airtight container. This will keep the herb from catching moisture.

Place this container in a cool, dry place away from sunlight. Remember that sunlight will bleach your herb if overexposed to it.

To preserve its flavor for more time, do not crush the leaves after drying. Crush them at the time you are going to use them.

As a thumb rule, expiration date of dried herbs is less than a year. After that time, most herbs have already lost their flavor. So it is important that you label your herbs with the date in which they were stored.

Do not store dried herbs that show at least a small sign of mold.

One third of a dried herb is equivalent to a whole of a fresh one. This would be, if you are asked for 1 tablespoon of a fresh herb, add 1 teaspoon of a dried one.



# Conclusion

Drying herbs is an art that is mastered with practice. The above guide is a start into getting the best of your herbs by drying them. Try all the techniques suggested in general and by plant. Of course, there are a lot more herbs not included in this material. The good news is that even though the Plant Kingdom displays an immense variety in design, the main biological principles that govern them all are the same. This means that the procedures you need to apply for one plant are very similar to the ones you would apply to the rest. Variations are slight and within a moderate range.

Drying your own herbs proves itself a healthy choice, especially if you harvest them from your backyard. In these times in which very few things seem to be organic, it is a very wise choice to consume products that can easily be produced at your own house. Grow your own fresh herbs and give your food a distinctive natural touch. Preserve them for a longer time by drying them and storing them properly.

Not only will drying herbs save you from chemicals used in the industry but will also save you a few dollars. If you compare the price between a fresh herb and the same one dried, you might be astonished at the difference. Drying your own herbs takes time and dedication but it definitively pays off. It is one way of carrying on a healthy life, a healthy choice.



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