



# ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

**The Garden Spot  
For week of August 24, 2009**

## **Growing & Drying Herbs**

In the past, herbs often played a small part in a meal, now some herbs are an essential ingredients in recipes like salsa, pesto, soups, and others. If you've watched television cooking shows, you've probably noticed how frequently fresh and dried herbs are used in recipes. Fortunately herbs are relatively easy to grow, and even easier to harvest and preserve.

### **Growing and Harvesting Herbs**

There are some general statements about growing requirements for most herbs. Most, if not all, culinary herbs thrive in sunny sites with well-drained, infertile soils. If you've ever visited an herb garden you've probably noticed that they are in sunny locations and have well-drained soil. The fastest way to kill an herb is to place it in a shady, wet spot in the landscape. Herbs rarely need fertilizer. In fact, fertilize them too much and they don't taste as good.

Herbs are either perennials or annuals in the garden. Knowing which are annuals and which are perennials is essential when planning and planting an herb garden. Perennial herbs like sage, thyme, lavender, chives and mint do not need to be replanted each year. But annuals like basil and cilantro will not survive winters – so they must be replanted each spring. To make matters more confusing, dill, fennel, and a few other annual herbs reseed each year. Once planted, they often return year after year. Just don't expect them to be in the same place in the garden every year!

The best time to harvest herbs is in the morning when the sprigs are fresh. Harvesting herbs is simple. Most herbs have the best flavor and fragrance before flowering. Harvest about one-third to one-half of the plant just as the flower buds appear. Annual herbs can be cut back more severely since they do not overwinter and they will regrow quickly. After harvest, be sure

to wash the leaves and stems thoroughly and let them dry slightly on clean towels before use or preservation.

### **Preserving Herbs**

Most herbs can be dried and stored for long periods in air-tight jars in the kitchen. There are several ways to dry herbs. The most popular and easiest method is air-drying. After harvesting and cleaning the herbs, simply hang small bunches in a warm, dark, well-ventilated location for a couple of weeks until the leaves are crispy. Once dry, the leaves can be separated from the stems, then crushed and placed into air-tight jars. Keep the jars in a dark location in the kitchen for easy access when cooking.

Herbs also can be dried on cheesecloth or screens in well-ventilated locations. Drying herbs outdoors may take longer, is often dependent on weather and can invite some pests to the area.

The oven or microwave is a faster way to dry herbs. In the oven, place herb leaves in a single layer on a cookie sheet. Set the oven to 180 F and place the cookie sheet in the oven for several hours. Open the oven frequently and stir the herbs to make sure they are drying evenly without burning.

While drying herbs in the microwave is fast, it does require a bit of practice. A small amount of herb leaves are placed in a single layer on paper towels and heated in several short intervals (usually a minute or less). Through the process of trial and error you'll learn about how long it will take to dry different herbs without blackening the leaves. You'll also notice that some herbs dried in the microwave will retain more of their "natural color." As long as they are dried completely, they will keep for long periods in air-tight containers.

A few herbs, including basil, actually can be preserved better by freezing than drying. Frozen basil leaves also will keep the bright green foliage color that air-drying usually takes away.

Following are some common herbs, including whether they are annuals or perennials, and methods of preservation:

<b>Herb</b>	<b>Annual or Perennial</b>	<b>How to Preserve</b>
Basil	Annual	Fresh, dried or Frozen
Chives	Perennial	Fresh, dried, or frozen
Cilantro	Annual	Fresh or dried
Dill	Annual	Fresh or dried
Fennel	Annual	Fresh or dried
Marjoram	Annual	Fresh, dried, or frozen
Mint	Perennial	Fresh or dried
Oregano	Perennial	Fresh or dried
Parsley	Biennial, but treated like an annual	Fresh or dried
Rosemary	Perennial	Fresh or dried
Sage	Perennial	Fresh or dried
Thyme	Perennial	Fresh, dried, or frozen

For more information, especially on drying specific herbs, stop by the Limestone County Extension Office and ask for publication HE-605, "Drying Herbs". You can also obtain copies by going online to [www.aces.edu/publications](http://www.aces.edu/publications) and searching for Publication #605.



(assortment of herbs)

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