

## Herbal Bounty

By Susan Camp

Summer has arrived. In fact, I think it arrived about two weeks ago, but Sunday was the Summer Solstice, the halfway point of longest day and shortest night of the year, so summer is officially here. If you grow herbs, you may have noticed that the plants look lush and full right now. It is time to harvest, before your herbs flower and while volatile oils are most potent. Herbs can be harvested anytime between the end of May and the end of June. The summer solstice, around June 21<sup>st</sup>, is an easy date to remember. You can cut herbs the rest of the summer, but if you plan to dry or freeze your cuttings, now is the best time to harvest in order to preserve flavor and fragrance.

Rinse herb plants the day before harvesting with a light spray of cool water to wash away insects and dust or rinse immediately after cutting. Keep a dedicated knife or a small pair of craft scissors for cutting herbs. Harvest before noon; the afternoon heat can dissipate volatile oils. Harvest one type of herb at a time and place on separate paper towels to dry in order to avoid mixing oils or cultivars. Oregano and marjoram are related, but each has a distinctive aroma and flavor and there are numerous cultivars of thyme; it would be easy to confuse them.

There are two basic methods of preserving herbs: drying and freezing. Drying is the traditional method and several drying techniques exist. The simplest way is to gather several stems of the same species and secure with twine or a rubber band. Place tied stems in a clean paper lunch bag and hang upside down in a warm (80 to 85° F), dark, dry, clean area. Cheesecloth looks quaintly pretty when wrapped around herbs, but it is difficult to remove once leaves have dried. Covering herbs protects them from dust and insects and prevents the loss of ripe seeds. Other drying techniques include using a fruit dehydrator or the microwave. Herbs dried in a microwave must be watched closely. A burnt taste can result from drying too long. Many sources do not recommend oven drying, because it is difficult to regulate the temperature at the needed 80° to 90° F. Air drying on a rack is another option. Once the herbs have dried to the crumbly point, the leaves can be stripped and pulverized or stored in pieces in dark glass containers in a cool, dark cabinet. Be sure to label and date the containers. Discard herbs that smell musty or mildewed or are discolored. Dried herbs will keep for six to eight months. When you cook with dried herbs, start with a smaller amount than you would use with fresh ones, as the flavor of dried herbs is stronger.

A few herbs, like parsley, chives, cilantro, and dill, retain color and flavor if frozen. As with any method, there are disagreements about how to freeze herbs. Some growers prefer to blanch herbs by plunging into hot water for 30 seconds before freezing, claiming that blanching preserves color, while others disdain blanching, although basil can turn into an ugly, black mess if not blanched before freezing. Herbs can be frozen in old-fashioned ice trays or in sandwich bags. Label and date containers. Frozen herbs should be used within six to eight months.

Once you begin preserving your herbs and using them in cooking or crafts, you will never want to go back to using supermarket herbs again. Of course, you don't have to dry or freeze everything. Nothing tastes better than soups, stews, sauces, and salads seasoned and garnished with fresh herbs. A bouquet of herbs wrapped in colorful tissue paper and tied with a pretty ribbon or cord makes a fragrant and practical hostess gift. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-420 offers valuable information on growing, harvesting, and preserving herbs.

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