

Consuming Thoughts

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For Berks Co.



Creative cooks and chefs recognize that both fresh and home-dried herbs can be of higher quality than those purchased commercially and the flavor and fragrance of home-grown herbs can last all year if the plants are carefully harvested and stored.

You probably have already been harvesting most leafy herbs during this growing season, and left enough of the plant to ensure further growth. Basil, mint, marjoram, rosemary, thyme, and most

others can be harvested in small amounts for immediate use by cutting the ends of stems. This type of clipping encourages branching, and will produce bushier plants. Chives, chervil, and parsley are exceptions, and should be cut off near the base of the stem rather than from the top.

The best time for gathering herbs is mid-morning on a sunny day; after the dew has dried, but before their essential oils have dissipated. After you cut the herbs,

rinse them in lukewarm to cool water and pat dry with a towel. To keep the herbs fresh for use later in the day, place stems down in a glass of water.

It is especially important to harvest herbs for drying or freezing when their oils are at maximum concentration. Leafy herbs are ready when the flower buds begin to open; seeds when they change from green to brown; and herb flowers when fully opened. Leafy herbs should be cut halfway down the stem, allowing for a second growth. At the end of the season, annuals can be cut to the ground, but some foliage should be left on perennial herbs.

After rinsing and patting dry, the herbs, if they are long-stemmed, can be tied in small bunches, labeled, and hung upside down in a well-ventilated location—an enclosed porch or a spare room.

Flowers, seed heads, and herbs with short stems should be dried on a drying rack. A window screen propped between two

chairs will work, or a simple rack can be built of 1x2's and cheesecloth or screen. The herbs should be spread in a single layer, and turned each day, so they will dry completely.

It will take about two weeks for the herbs to dry depending on the weather. Foliage should be crisp before stripping from stems. Seeds enclosed in capsules should be removed and dried for an additional 7 to 10 days. It is possible to shorten the process to one day by drying the herbs in a dehydrator or in the oven. The essential oils will be destroyed and the herbs ruined if they are dried at a high temperature.

Dried herbs should be stored in a cool, dry place where they are not exposed to direct sunlight. Ceramic, opaque glass, or metal containers are best for herb storage; paper and cardboard will absorb the oils. If clear glass jars are used they should be kept out of

the sun to avoid bleaching of the herbs.

Soon after the dried herbs are bottled, they should be checked to see if moisture has condensed inside the containers. If this happens, the herbs should be removed immediately and allowed to dry for a few days longer.

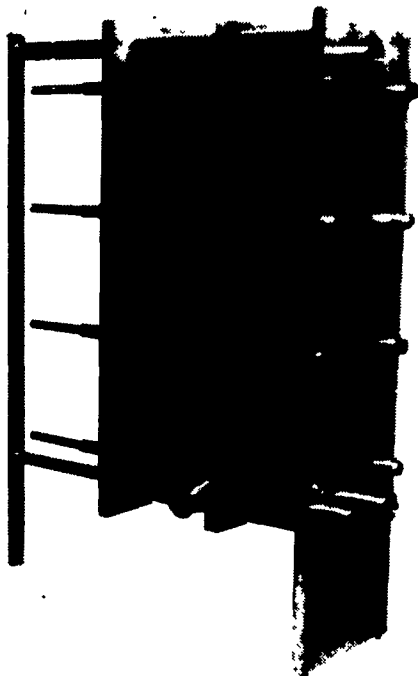
Many herbs — among them marjoram, chives, parsley, and tarragon — can be successfully frozen. Herbs to be preserved in this way should be rinsed and dried, but need not be blanched, before they are placed in labeled plastic bags or boxes for freezing. Each herb may be frozen separately, or they may be combined in often used mixtures. By harvesting herbs now, you'll enjoy top quality home-grown herbs throughout the year.

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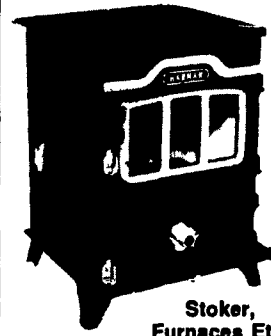
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