

## Enjoying Fresh Herbs

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It won't be long now before we'll be putting in gardens and filling up an assortment of pots and containers. If you've never tried growing your own herbs before, you might like to try a few of your favorites this spring. If you're limited on space, container gardening is an especially good option. If you've never planted herbs before, you may be more successful initially starting with transplants, rather than seeds. When selecting herbs, be sure they're meant for culinary uses, if you intend to use them for cooking. Some of the ornamental herbs may have a less desirable flavor because they've been bred for appearance rather than taste appeal.

Adding fresh herbs is a quick way to transform ordinary meals into extraordinary meals. Besides helping flavor foods when cutting back on salt, fat and sugar, herbs may offer additional benefits of their own. Researchers are finding many culinary herbs, both fresh and dried, have antioxidants that may help protect against such diseases as cancer and heart disease. Here are a few tips to help you enjoy the flavor and health benefits of fresh herbs in your cooking.

When substituting fresh herbs for dried herbs, use three times as much of the fresh herb as you would use of the dried herb. Purchase herbs close to the time you plan to use them. When growing herbs in your own garden, the ideal time for picking is in the morning after the dew has dried but before the sun gets hot. This helps ensure the best flavor and storage quality. Annual herbs can be harvested down to about four inches tall and they still will regrow for use later in the season. For perennial herbs, don't take off more than a third of the plant at any given time.

You can use an open or a perforated plastic bag to store fresh herbs in your refrigerator crisper drawer for a few days. To extend the freshness of herbs, snip off the ends of the stems on the diagonal and place herbs in a tall glass with an inch of water, like cut flowers. Cover them loosely with a plastic bag to allow for air circulation. Place them in the refrigerator and change the water daily. Herbs may last a week or more stored this way, but the flavor will diminish the longer they're stored.

Wash herbs when you're ready to use them. Wash smaller amounts of herbs thoroughly under running water, then shake off the moisture and pat with clean paper towels. If you're washing a larger amount at one time, treat them as you would salad greens. Place in a deep bowl of cold water and swish around, then transfer to another bowl of clean water and repeat the washing process until all dirt and grit are gone and the water is clear.

For most recipes, mince herbs into tiny pieces. Chop with a chef's knife on a cutting board or snip with kitchen scissors. Normally the part of the herb you harvest will be the leaves. With small-leaved plants such as thyme, you can use both leaves and stems for cooking early in the season. Later in the season, the stems become tougher, so use just the

leaves. For herbs with tender stems, such as parsley and cilantro, it's OK to snip some of the stem in with the leaves.

Unlike dried herbs, fresh herbs are usually added toward the end in cooked dishes to preserve their flavor. Add the more delicate herbs – basil, chives, cilantro, parsley, marjoram – a minute or two before the end of cooking or sprinkle them on the food before it's served. The less delicate herbs – oregano, rosemary, tarragon, thyme – can be added about the last 20 minutes of cooking. Fresh herbs can be added to refrigerated cold foods several hours before serving. Allow at least a couple of hours, if possible, for cold foods with herbs to chill, to help the flavors blend.

If you raise more herbs than you can eat, you can always enjoy herbal bouquets throughout the house. You can use either single herbs or combinations of herbs, or you can use the herbs as greenery mixed in with other flowers. To help preserve the aroma and color of your herb bouquets, place them out of direct sunlight.

For more information on growing herbs or gardening, please call the UNH Cooperative Extension - Carroll County Office at 447-3834.

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