

A vibrant garden scene featuring purple lavender, yellow daisies, green basil, and a wooden mortar and pestle. The background is filled with tall stalks of purple lavender. In the foreground, there are several bright yellow daisies and fresh green basil leaves. A wooden mortar and pestle is positioned in the lower right corner, partially filled with herbs.

CULINARY HERBS

BY JOHN MASON AND STAFF OF ACS DISTANCE EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Although herbs can be used in many ways, the most popular uses are in food preparation and medicine.

What are Culinary Herbs?

The word 'herb' encompasses a large group of plants including soft-stemmed herbaceous plants, annuals, bulbs, woody plants and some larger shrubs and trees useful to human beings.

Culinary herbs are distinguished from other herbs insofar as they are edible. Generally, they are aromatic plants which may be added to dishes or used in beverages. They are usually used in small amounts, although in some cultures and countries herbs may be consumed in larger quantities.

The fresh and dried leaves, flowers and sometimes stems of culinary herbs are used in cooking. They include sage, tarragon, chives, parsley, and a multitude of other species. Sometimes people confuse culinary herbs with spices. Spices are usually powdered substances produced from the grinding of seeds, roots, bark, fruit and sometimes the flowers or flower parts e.g. cardamom (seeds), cinnamon (bark), and saffron (the stamens of the flowers). Herbs are usually the leaves and may be used fresh or dried.

Dried herbs can be added as flavourings to a range of foods such as soups, casseroles, sauces, pasta, and roasts. They can also be added to breads, cakes, and other baked foods.

Fresh herbs may be used similarly or added as garnishes to various dishes where they can provide anything from a fresh taste to a sweet or tangy flavour.

Culinary herbs do two main things:

- **Replace salt and sugar as flavourings** - salt and sugar are widely consumed in quantities which are detrimental to health. Sugar toxicity, caused by high quantities of refined sugar in processed food (which refers to any of a group of carbohydrates), has been dubbed a silent epidemic.
- **Add a variety of flavours** - these enhance our enjoyment and can encourage people to try new foods, thereby experiencing a range of healthy foods rather than just eating bland, processed, or takeaway 'fast' food which is often low in nutritional value.

Herbs have been adding flavours to food since man's earliest times. With the tremendous variety of herbs that are now available, today's cook can add colour, texture and flavour to any dish.

Plant Parts Used as Culinary Herbs

Although culinary herbs mainly involve the leaves, different parts of the plant may be used.

- **Leaves** – These may be eaten fresh, (e.g. basil, chives, or mint) or used to flavour dishes and drinks (e.g. lemongrass, myrtle, or catnip).
 - **Stems** – Sometimes stems are consumed with or without leaves (e.g. coriander/cilantro).
 - **Seeds** – A range of seeds are eaten (e.g. cumin and caraway).
 - **Fruit** – The fruits of some herbs are important (e.g. chilli, fennel, or celery).
 - **Bulbs** – The bulbs, and often leafy stems of some herby plants are consumed (e.g. onions, garlic, and leeks).
 - **Flowers** – Some flowers are edible (e.g. nasturtium or pansy) as well as specific flower parts (e.g. saffron).
 - **Sprouts** – The shoots from the seeds of some plants may be edible. However, proceed with caution as specific sprouts can be toxic. Those that are safe to use include beansprouts, pea shoots and alfalfa sprouts.
- Herbs are mentioned throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.
 - It is believed that schools of herbalists have existed in Egypt since 3000 B.C.
 - Sumerians prepared a written herbal record around 2500 BC.
 - Herbs, such as thyme, marjoram, and sage were traded in the markets of Athens by 700 BC.
 - Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460 – c. 370 BC), often referred to as the “Father of Medicine”, used plants to treat diseases and catalogued over 400 herbs.
 - The Charaka Samhita, an ancient Ayurvedic text written around 400 BC, mentions over 300 herbs.
 - Pen Ts’ao Ching, the materia medica of classical Chinese medicine likely written around 200 AD, names over 365 herbs.
 - The Romans brought Mediterranean herbs to northern Europe.
 - There is evidence of early herb gardens in Europe dating back to the Middle Ages.
 - Voyages of exploration and the establishment of trade routes made exotic herbs available throughout much of the world.

Brief History of Culinary Herbs

Wild and cultivated herbs have been used for culinary and medicinal purposes for thousands of years. It is assumed that early humans discovered numerous uses of herbs through trial and error.

- Cave paintings of herbs dated to 13,000 – 25,000 BC have been discovered in the Lascaux caves in France.

Fresh Herbs

Fresh herbs are usually added to hot dishes towards the end of cooking so that their flavour is not lost, or they

may be added to dishes which take less time to cook. Those herbs used when fresh generally have tender leaves that are easy to chew and break down when cooked. Chives, coriander, and basil are great options, with their subtle yet distinct flavours.

Storing Fresh Herbs

Fresh herbs may be stored in several ways:

- If the herbs were bought with its roots attached inside a pot (usually enclosed in a clear plastic sleeve), they can be stored in the pot in the fridge for up to a week. Place it on a saucer and add some water to the pot.
- If you have cut stems without roots, remove any small side shoots from the bottom of the stem and place the stems into a glass jar or another container full of water. Allow the leafy tops to protrude from the jar. Stand it in the fridge or in a cool room.
- You can place the foliage between moist paper towels and store the stems inside a plastic bag. A zip lock type bag is ideal because it can be sealed.

Use a sharp knife or scissors to avoid bruising the leaves or stems when preparing fresh herb stems or leaves for storage. Crushed leaves will blacken and deteriorate quickly.

Cooking with Fresh Herbs

Fresh herbs should be washed before use, to remove any soil or other debris. When using home grown herbs, gently

submerging herbs in water should dislodge any unwelcome guests, such as aphids or caterpillars. Delicate leaves and foliage should be treated carefully to avoid bruising them.

When to add fresh herbs to the cooking depends on the type of herb, its preparation, and the desired flavour.

- Robust herbs, such as thyme and rosemary, can be added early in the cooking process. Delicate herbs are best added towards the end to prevent loss of flavour.
- Whole herbs which release their aroma slowly, such as bay leaves, may be added early in the cooking process. Chopping breaks open the plant cells, releasing the aroma. Chopped herbs are best added just prior to serving.
- A subtle flavour can be achieved if herbs are added early in the cooking process. The flavour can be enhanced by adding more towards the end.

Dried Herbs

Dried herbs have a more concentrated flavour than fresh herbs, as the drying process locks in the flavours. They are usually added to dishes in moderation. When using dried herbs instead of fresh herbs in a recipe, you can reduce the amount used by one third to one quarter.

Many herbs used for drying have tougher leaves and are often used in dishes which take a longer time to cook. This way their flavour is leached into the dish throughout the cooking process.

How to Dry Herbs

To dry herbs all you need is a cool, preferably dark, reasonably well-ventilated room. This room should be relatively dry (avoid kitchens and bathrooms). Direct sunlight can also reduce the aromatic oil content of the herb, which is why a darkened room is ideal. Your harvest is simply tied in bunches and hung upside down from the roof, or from curtain rods. In very humid climates, bunches may not dry as well and may develop fungal growths. To minimise such problems be sure to use a well-ventilated room (a fan may be helpful), make small bunches and allow room for air to move between bunches. You can also dry herbs in a dehydrator.

After drying, foliage can be stripped and either used or stored in sealed, dry containers. Roots, and sometimes other parts, are often ground into a powder after drying. Containers should be labelled with the name of the plant and when it was harvested to avoid any confusion.

Other Preserving Methods

Herbs are used to enhance our food in so many ways. However, most herbs do not grow all year round, and even if they do, the best flavour tends to only peak at certain times.

The trick is to work out when the flavour is best; catch it at that time and preserve it for use whenever you want it. While drying herbs is the most obvious method to use, there are other ways of preserving herbs. Most will see a little loss of flavour; but if you use the

right technique for the right herb and get your timing right, the loss of flavour may be unnoticeable.

Sugars, Vinegars & Salts

Sugar, vinegar, and salt are all-natural preservatives and can be infused with the flavour of herbs, to preserve that flavour. You do need to consider that the preservative's flavour will also be captured in what you produce. If you want a salty, herbal flavour to use in a casserole, a herbal salt may be suitable; but a herbal sugar is more appropriate to use in a fruit punch.

Freezing

Freezing preserves the essential oils which give herbs their flavour. It is a good option for leafy herbs, such as parsley, basil, and coriander (cilantro).

Methods:

- Rinse, air dry and freeze in a plastic bag or container.
- Blend the fresh herbs into a paste with oil and freeze in an ice cube tray.
- Chop the herbs, pack them into an ice cube tray, fill with water or broth and freeze. Frozen cubes can be stored in a bag or container in the freezer for up to 3 months.

Lifting and Keeping Herbs over Winter

Some bulbs and corms, such as onions, garlic, and shallots, can be preserved by lifting and storing the dormant bulb over winter.