

THE HERB BOOK

In a world of chemical fertilizers, insecticides, artificial flavorings and preservatives, many are seeking a more wholesome and natural way of life. And the emphasis is on herbs. Herbs are once again finding their way back into our gardens and lives. People are rediscovering the many varied uses of herbs to flavor foods, to make fragrances, cosmetics, dyes and natural insecticides.

Culture

Contrary to popular belief, herb gardening does not require witchcraft or large formal gardens. Herbs, being hardy and adaptable, are easy to grow. Unless otherwise noted, provide herbs with full sun and well-drained soil. Indoor herbs should receive at least 5 hours of sunlight or 12-14 hours of artificial light daily.

Harvest

The best time to harvest the foliage of most herbs is just prior to blooming. Parsley, loveage, burnet, and savory leaves are best harvested young. Clip the foliage in the morning after the dew has evaporated but before the sun becomes too hot. Cut approximately 1/3 of the foliage off to encourage the plant to put on new growth. Use only the younger leaves because they have more flavor and are less bitter.

Seeds are ready to be harvested when the seed heads change color; usually greenish-brown. To harvest, cut off seed heads on a hot, dry day. Dry for two weeks on harvesting tray. then store in an airtight container.

Roots are dug as soon as the leaves start to form in the spring or as they begin to die back in the fall. One should only harvest about 1/3 of the roots so as not to rob the plant of all its stored nutrients. Rinse soil off roots before drying, but do not use a brush.

Preservation

Air Drying: To air dry herbs, hang in bunches upside down in a dark, well ventilated area. Or spread in a thin layer on screens or frames covered with cheesecloth.

Oven Drying: Spread a thin layer on a cookie sheet and bake at no more than 120° F until they are dry and crispy.

Microwave Drying: Place a few sprigs on a towel and heat on the lowest setting for 30 seconds at a time until dry and crumbly. Timing will vary with different herbs.

Freezing: Remove leaves from stems. Herbs with small, fine leaves should be frozen on the stem. Other larger leaves can be chopped or frozen whole. Do not crowd the leaves in the package, and place them in the freezer where they won't get crushed. Thaw them out and use them the same as you would fresh herbs.

Storage

Store herbs in airtight containers away from heat and light. Glass is best because plastic will absorb the essential oils. Store herbs, dried or frozen, for no more than a year because they begin to lose potency.