

Drying Herbs, Seeds and Nuts

DRYING HERBS

Drying is the easiest method of preserving herbs. Simply expose the leaves, flowers or seeds to warm, dry air. Leave the herbs in a well-ventilated area until the moisture evaporates. Sun, oven and dehydrator drying are not recommended because the herbs can lose flavor and color.

The best time to harvest most herbs for drying is just before the flowers first open when they are in the bursting bud stage. Gather the herbs in the early morning after the dew has evaporated to minimize wilting. Avoid bruising the leaves. They should not lie in the sun or remain unattended after harvesting. Rinse herbs in cool water and gently shake to remove excess moisture. Discard all bruised, soiled or imperfect leaves and stems.

Sturdy Herbs: Herbs such as sage, thyme, summer savory and parsley are the easiest to dry. They can be tied into small bundles and air-dried. Air-drying outdoors is often possible; however, better color and flavor retention usually results from drying indoors.

Tender-Leaf Herbs: Basil, tarragon, lemon balm and the mints have a high moisture content and will mold if not dried quickly. Try hanging the tender-leaf herbs or those with seeds inside paper bags to dry. Tear or punch holes in the sides of the bag. Suspend a small bunch (large amounts will mold) of herbs in a bag and close the top with a rubber band. Place where air currents will circulate through the bag. Any leaves and seeds that fall off will be caught in the bottom of the bag.

Another method — especially nice for mint, sage or bay leaf — is to dry the leaves separately. Remove the best leaves from the stems. Lay the leaves on a paper towel, without allowing leaves to touch.

Cover with another towel and layer of leaves. Five layers may be dried at one time using this method. Dry in a very cool oven. The oven light of an electric range or the pilot light of a gas range furnishes enough heat for overnight drying. Leaves dry flat and retain a good color.

When the leaves are crispy dry and crumple easily between the fingers, they are ready to be packaged and stored. Dried leaves may be left whole and crumpled as used, or coarsely crumpled before storage. Husks can be removed from seeds by rubbing the seeds between the hands and blowing away the chaff. Place herbs in airtight containers and store in a cool, dry, dark area to protect color and fragrance.

Microwave ovens are a fast way to dry herbs when only small quantities are to be prepared. Place 4 to 5 herb branches in the oven between paper towels. Heat for two to three minutes on high. If not brittle and dry when removed from the oven, repeat microwave drying for 30 seconds more.

Chives: Chop into the size pieces desired. Spread on a plate or cookie sheet and set out of the way in a warm room.

Dill seeds and other seeds: Spread on a plate or screen and dry indoors.

Horseradish: Remove small rootlets and stubs. Peel or scrape roots. Grate, then spread thin on trays and dry in dehydrator.

Garlic: Peel cloves, then slice or chop. Dry in a dehydrator, or if finely chopped, spread on plate or screen and dry at room temperature.

PUMPKIN SEEDS

Drying seeds and roasting seeds are two different processes. To dry, carefully wash pumpkin seeds to remove the clinging fibrous pumpkin tissue. Pumpkin seeds can be dried in the sun, in a dehydrator at 115 to 120 °F for one to two hours or in an oven on warm for three to four hours. Stir them frequently to avoid scorching. To roast, take dried pumpkin seeds, toss with oil and/or salt and roast in a preheated oven at 250 °F for 10 to 15 minutes.

POPCORN

Certain varieties of popcorn can be dried at home. The best varieties are Japanese Hull-less, Hybrid South American Mushroom, Creme Puff Hybrid, White Cloud and Dynamite. Leave the ears of popcorn on the stalks until the kernels are well-dried. Harvested ears of corn can be air-dried at a temperature below 130 °F. When the kernels are dry, remove them from the ears and package.

Dried corn will appear shriveled. Pop a few kernels to test. Popcorn will dry down to about 10 percent moisture. No pretreatment is necessary.

SUNFLOWER SEEDS

Sunflower seeds usually are left on the flower to dry. The flower may have to be wrapped with cheesecloth to prevent the birds from eating the seeds. Seeds may be dried in the sun or in a dehydrator at 100 °F. Higher temperature affects the flavor. When seeds are dried, they can be roasted in a shallow pan at 300 °F for 10 to 15 minutes.

PEANUTS

Peanuts are actually a legume instead of a nut and can be dried and roasted at slightly higher temperatures. Peanuts can be dried shelled or unshelled. Spread in single layer and dry at 130 °F. Peanuts are dry when their shells have hardened to a brittle state. Crack one. The nut meat should be tender, but not shriveled. To roast peanuts in the shell, place them in a shallow pan at 300 °F for 30 to 40

minutes. Stir several times. If they are shelled, roast them for 20 to 25 minutes and stir frequently to prevent scorching.

PACKAGING AND STORING DRIED FOODS

Dried foods are susceptible to insect contamination and moisture reabsorption and must be properly packaged and stored immediately. First, cool completely. Packaging warm food causes sweating which could provide enough moisture for mold to grow. Pack foods into clean, dry, insect-proof containers as tightly as possible without crushing.

Glass jars, metal cans or boxes with tightly fitted lids or moisture- and vapor-resistant freezer cartons make good containers for storing dried foods. Heavy-duty plastic bags are acceptable but are not insect- and rodent-proof.

Pack food in amounts that will be used in a recipe. Every time a package is re-opened, the food is exposed to air and moisture that lower the quality of the food. Dried foods should be stored in cool, dry, dark areas. Recommended storage times for dried foods range from four months to a year. Because food quality is affected by heat, the storage temperature helps determine the length of storage; the higher the temperature, the shorter the storage time.

Foods that are packaged seemingly bone-dry can spoil if moisture is reabsorbed during storage. Check dried foods frequently during storage to see if they are still dry. Glass containers are excellent for storage because any moisture that collects on the inside can be seen easily. Foods affected by moisture, but not spoiled, should be used immediately or redried and repackaged. Moldy foods should be discarded.

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Information Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University.

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