

The Herbal Kitchen:

Simple Culinary & Medicinal Feats



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My Favorite Drying Method

Harvest herbs regularly, which will encourage new and bushier growth—plus more herbs for your kitchen! Loosely place recently harvested herbs—stems and all—in a brown paper bag. (It's not necessary to wash, but do discard any dirty or damaged leaves and bugs first.) Fold shut and let sit in the windshield of your car for 1-3 days. Check daily for dryness. The leaves will crumble easily between your fingertips when ready. Immediately remove the leaves from the stems or “garble” the herb w/hands until cut and sifted. Compost stems and store leaves in glass in a cool, dark, dry place.

Herbal Teas: Infusion (Steep)

The infusion method is best for delicate parts of a plant, leaves and flowers. When you make tea from a teabag, you're making an infusion. Use 1 tsp to 1 Tbsp of dried herb per cup of water. Cover and let steep for 5-20 minutes, strain, and drink. Larger amounts of herb and longer steeping times make stronger tasting teas, less herb and time makes a lighter tea.

Herbal Teas: Decoction (Simmer)

The decoction method is best for harder parts of herbs, roots, bark and seeds. These parts of the plant often make a week tea if only allowed to infuse; simmering/decocting gets their properties out faster. Use 1 tsp to 1 Tbsp of dried herb per cup of water. Simmer for 5 to 20 minutes, strain, and drink. Larger amounts of herb and longer steeping times make stronger tasting teas, less herb and time makes a lighter tea.

Herbal Teas: Fresh Herb Infusions

Fresh herbs are not commonly used for tea because fresh herbs want to suck water into them, not give of themselves to the water. However, fresh herbs and sliced fresh fruit often taste much better than their dried counterparts—especially lemon balm, mints, citrus fruits, thyme, freshly sliced or grated ginger, and fresh evergreen needles. The solution? More time and more herbs. To make a fresh extract, bring water to a boil. Add a handful of herbs (or 1 Tbsp ginger) per 2 cups of water, cover, and let sit for 1-2 hours.

Herbal Paste

Some herbs like parsley, cilantro and chives lose too much of their flavor once dried. For these you can puree them fresh with olive oil. Sweeter herbs like mint and lemon balm can be pureed with canola oil for future baking ventures. Put the mix in Ziploc bags and then pull chunks off as needed. Thank you to Susan Belsinger for this tip! www.SusanBelsinger.com

Herbal Honey

Chop up your fresh or dry herb. If the herb is very juicy, you may want to wilt the herb in a hot location (out of direct sun) for a day. Per 1/2 cup of chopped herb (volume), add 2 cups of honey (volume). Bring to a gentle boil, shut off, and let cool. Repeat at least once and up to 3 times each day for 3 days. After the last heating, pour the warm mixture through a strainer and into jars. This works well for tasty and aromatic herbs, such as lemon balm, anise hyssop or mint, as well as those used as expectorants or cough/cold remedies such as bee balm, thyme, ginger, fresh spring pine branches.

Herbal Vinegar

Chop up your fresh herbs. Loosely pack a jar and cover them with vinegar. Let it sit for at least one month, strain, and use as desired. You may opt to put a whole sprig of herb into a finished vinegar for visual appeal. White distilled and rice vinegars have a somewhat neutral flavor and clear color that ultimately show off the individuality of the herbs in the finished product. Chive blossoms make a lovely and delicious pink vinegar. Also consider thyme varieties, tarragon, and Italian herbs for vinegars. Apple cider vinegar has its own healing properties and works particularly well for nutritive vinegars and fire cider.

Herbal Cordial

There are many variations on this. Make up some simple syrup by simmering 2 cups of sugar with 1 cup of water until clear. Loosely fill a jar (quart will usually do) with fresh herbs or fruit. Cover with the simple syrup and 1 1/2 cups or more of good quality, high proof vodka or other desired neutral alcohol. Cover, shake, and let sit

for at least one month or until desired flavor is reached. Strain and store in the cupboard for special events and a delicious dessert! Great for vanilla (1 bean per 1-2 cups), licorice-y plants (anise hyssop, anise, fennel), lemony plants (balm, grass, mint, thyme, verbena), mints of all kinds, fruits of all kinds.

Herbal Oil (General)

You have to be careful with culinary herbal oils because herbs may harbor botulism spores that naturally occur in soil and thrive in an anaerobic oil environment. While rare, it can happen. Most culinary oils are best made on the spot and consumed within one week. OR, consider making an herbal paste (above) and keeping it in the freezer. I am more apt to make oils for bodycare purposes, techniques below, although the same techniques could be used for culinary oils as well. Olive oil is the herbalist's choice for medicinal and most culinary oils. However, coconut, grapeseed and other oils may also be used.

Herbal Oil (Maceration Method)

For dry herb, per 1 oz of ground or cut/sifted herb add 4-8 oz of oil, mix in blender and pour in jar. For fresh herb, wilt to half its weight in water, loosely pack in a jar, and then cover with oil (at least one inch above or to the tip top of the jar). Place the jar in a warm spot—for example a sunny window, warm car, or oven with a pilot light—for 2 weeks. If the spot is sunny, cover the jar with cloth or a brown paper bag. Strain.

Herbal Oil (Double Boiler or Crock Pot Method)

Use the same proportions mentioned above for dry or fresh herbs. Pour into double boiler or crock and let sit at the lowest setting (ideally around 90-110 degrees, although the lowest setting may be warmer) overnight or up to three days. Strain.

Herbal Oil (Blender Method)

For dry herbs only. Grind up herb in a blender. Per 1 oz of herb, mix in 1/2 oz of grain alcohol. Mix in to the herb, it will have a consistency similar to beach sand or potting soil. Cover and let sit overnight or as long as desired. Pour into blender, Per 1 oz of starting herb, add 7 oz of oil. Blend in blender until the blender gets warm, about 5-10 minutes. Strain.

Straining Herbal Oils (All Methods)

Place a fine mesh strainer over a bowl and line with cheesecloth. Pour the herb/oil mixture through. Wring the oil out of the cheesecloth and discard the herbal dregs. Let sit and decant for desired clarity and/or strain further through a coffee filter. Pour into dark glass bottles and store in a cool, dark, dry spot.

Fresh Herb Tincture

Chop up fresh herbs or roots, and stuff them in a mason jar until you can't fit any more. Fill the jar to the brim with whole grain alcohol or high proof vodka or brandy. A day later, top the jar off again. Leave the jar in a dark place for at least one month (or as long as you like). Strain it out with a fine mesh strainer and muslin or cheesecloth to squeeze out the last bit. This method will give you approximately a 1:2 fresh herb extraction, meaning that for each ounce (weight, as shown on a kitchen scale) of herb, you add 2 ounces (volume, as shown on a glass measuring cup). Most herbs do well with a fresh tincture: lemon balm, echinacea, valerian...

Dry Herb Tincture

Powder your herb in a food processor if it isn't already in powder form. Per 1 oz (weight on a kitchen scale) of herb, add 5 ounces of alcohol/water mix. (Do NOT use whole grain alcohol unless you dilute it with distilled water.) The ideal alcohol/water ratio will vary by herb, but 40-60% (80-120 proof vodka or brandy) works for most herbs. Add about 10% vegetable glycerine for high tannin herbs like cinnamon. Combine your ingredients in a mason jar and shake your mixture as often as possible, aiming for 2xs/day. After no less than one month (more is fine), strain the mixture through a coffee filter-lined strainer. This is a 1:5 dry tincture. It works well for some aromatic herbs such as lavender, but is most often used for herbs that are primarily available dry: cinnamon, chocolate, cardamom, astragalus...

Decoction Tincture Method

This is a variation on a dry tincture. Some herbs, especially roots, extract better with heat. Ginseng-family plants fall into this category. This is also better for extracts that do not need high alcohol percentage. For example, mucilaginous plants like comfrey, slippery elm, and marshmallow (notoriously hard to tincture) do well with this method. Echinacea, astragalus, and medicinal mushrooms—all rich in polysaccharides—are better with this method, too. Simmer your roots for 1-3 hours. When done, pour the hot mixture into a mason jar and add alcohol, cap, and let sit (macerate) for at least 1 month, shaking daily (once it has cooled). Ultimately you'll want at least 30% alcohol to prevent your formula from growing mold and bacteria. Keep this in your measurements. For example, per 1 ounce herb (weight), simmer in 3 ounces of water, then add 2 ounces of whole grain alcohol. Or, per 1 ounce herb (weight), simmer in 1 ounces of water, then add 4 ounces of high proof vodka.

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