

USING HERBS—FRESH OR DRIED

When cooking, using dried or fresh herbs will add flavor and aroma to anything you make. Herbs can take a boring, bland food and take it to a new level. Some times you may choose to use fresh herbs, but dried herbs are also able to enhance any dish. Depending on what you are making, sometimes dried herbs will actually taste better than the fresh, while other recipes should be made with fresh herbs if possible.

There is a simple rule to remember when substituting fresh herbs for dried herbs, and vice versa. One Tablespoon of fresh herbs is equal to one teaspoon of dried herbs because dried herbs are more potent and concentrated. You can also calculate the amount of dried herbs needed by using 1/3 the amount of fresh herbs in the recipe. When cooking with herbs, be sure to taste test before adding additional herbs.

Herbs can easily be grown in a home graden to even a window sill pot. Buying cut fresh herbs at the store is expensive, especially if you only use a small amount and let the rest of them spoil in the refrigerator. The trick is to learn when fresh herbs are needed. For example, in a fresh salad with greens or a pasta salad, or guacamole, fresh herbs will always be the best choice. When dried herbs are uncooked, they may taste and look dusty, and lack the flavor added by fresh herbs.

Some herbs that are always better fresh, even if the food is cooked, are chives, parsley, and tarragon. When dried, they don't offer as much flavor as the fresh version. When fresh, they should be served raw or only briefly cooked due to their delicate leaves.

Don't be mistaken, dried herbs can also add great flavor and aroma. When making a soup, stew, or sauce that must simmer for longer than ten minutes, dried herbs are the perfect choice. If a recipe requires more than ten or fifteen minutes, fresh herbs lose their flavor. For longer cooking foods, save money and get the flavors you need by choosing dried herbs.

The best dried herbs to keep on hand are bay leaves, curry leaf, fennel seed, oregano, thyme, and rosemary. Dried herbs should be discarded after one year because the quality of their flavors will decrease over time. Open the container and see if you can smell the herb.

Fresh herbs have a short shelf life, and need to be preserved properly to extend their freshness. To store fresh herbs such as rosemary or thyme, they can be wrapped in a damp paper towel and stored in the refrigerator in sealed plastic bags. If the herbs are more delicate, such as basil or mint, they need to be store standing in a glass with one inch of water in the bottom and covered with a plastic bag at room temperature.

To store dried herbs for optimum shelf life, they should be kept in a dry, cool place and out of light. After their container is opened, they lose taste and fragrance, so be sure to be aware of the usability of your dried herbs and discard them when they have lost potency.

If you like fresh basil, I recommend trying this recipe.

Basil Pesto (Recipe source: University of Nebraska Extension (<https://food.unl.edu/recipe/basil-pesto>))

Yield: 8 servings

Ingredients:

4 cups fresh basil, gently rubbed under cold running water
1/3 cup nuts (walnuts, pine nuts, almonds)
1 Tablespoon garlic, minced
1/2 cup Parmesan cheese
1/2 cup olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

Wash hands with soap and water.

Pat basil dry with a paper towel after washing. Place the basil and nuts in a food processor or blender. Pulse until combined. Scrape down sides with a spatula or spoon.

Add garlic and cheese to basil mixture and pulse until combined. Scrape down sides again with a spatula or spoon.

While the food processor is running, slowly add half of the olive oil. Stop the food processor and scrape down sides again. Start the food processor and add remaining oil.

Add salt and pepper, if desired.

Store leftovers in a sealed container in the refrigerator, or freeze for up to three months.

Notes:

If desired, leave out the Parmesan cheese. You may need to decrease the olive oil.

(Sources: www.marthastewart.com; www.spendwithpennies.com;
www.wyoextension.org/publications/Search_Details.php?pubid=195&pub=MP-121.3)