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Healthy Garden Tips

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HARVESTING HERBS

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HOW TO HARVEST FRESH HERBS

The fresher the better, so always harvest just the amount you need, the same day you plan to use your herbs. Harvest right after the morning dew dries, before weather gets really warm.

Use small, sharp scissors with narrow, pointed tips to harvest herbs. Carry rubber bands for bunching, but be gentle. A basket with a lid or tea towel will protect cut herbs from scorching sun. In warm weather, refrigerate cut herbs immediately, to discourage wilting.

Pungent herbs, like Arugula and Dandelion Greens should be harvested young, before flowering, so the flavor doesn't get too sharp. On the other hand, delicate leafed herbs, like Basil and French Tarragon, will be watery and bland if harvested too young. Herbs from woody plants, like Thyme and Rosemary, can be harvested any time. Harvest frost-tender plants, like French Tarragon and Basil, in October, before the first cold snap.

Whenever you're in the garden, pinch flowers off of vigorous green Basils, like Genoa or Sweet Basil, to encourage more leaf production. However, delicate Thai Basils do not need their gorgeous purple flowers removed.

While harvesting, prune out any dead, yellow or damaged parts of plants as you go. Put those unwanted pieces in your compost pile with other yard trimmings.

There are two basic harvesting methods, explained below; appropriate to the way different herbs grow in the garden. Bouquets of fresh herbs can be kept fresh for about a week by setting them into jars filled with an inch or two of water, covered loosely with plastic wrap, and refrigerated.

GRAB-AND-CUT METHOD

- For herbs with multiple straight stems growing at about the same height, use the "Grab-and-Cut" method. Grab a bunch of stems with one hand and cut them off about one inch below your hand. Lightly wrap a rubber band around the stems for ease of handling.
- These herbs should be trimmed very close to the ground, like a buzz haircut, to encourage new leaves from the plant base for later harvest. **Chives, French Sorrel, Cilantro, Arugula**
- Plants whose tender new growth comes up in the center of the plant need a good close buzz, but with a cowlick left undisturbed in the middle. **Parsley, Lovage, Salad Burnett, Angelica**

- Branching Herbs grow new stems just below your cut, so you shape the plant as you harvest, leaving plenty of leaves on the stems like a military flattop. **Marjoram, Savory, French Tarragon, Oregano, Rosemary and Mint (upright varieties)**
- Mounding Thyme requires special care. If you shear the whole plant it may die. Always leave at least 20% of the plant unpruned, *like a Mohawk*. (Creeping Thyme doesn't need this special treatment). **English, Lemon and Lime Thyme**

STEM-BY-STEM METHOD

The "Stem-by-Stem" method is necessary for herbs with stems growing at different heights, like Basil, where your cut needs to be placed carefully to promote additional growth. Also for slow-growing trees or shrubs, like Lemon Verbena and Bay Laurel.

- For fast-growers, select attractive tops, then cut the stem above a pair of good sized leaves, to promote new branches for later harvest. Do not cut into the lower, woody parts of stems or the plant may die. **Basil, Shiso (Perilla), Epazote, Amaranth**
- Sprawling, prostrate herbs may be cut stem-by-stem to maintain a tidy plant, but use the "Grab-and-Cut" method on upright varieties. **Spearmint, Prostrate Rosemary**
- Cut lavender above a pair of leaves. On some varieties, this means part way down the stem, where two more spikes will grow. On others, cut about 2" below the bushy growth on the stem. **English, French and Spanish Lavender varieties**
- For slow-growing trees and shrubs, prune it for shape. Remove crossing branches, weak limbs, and other unnecessary stems. Then, if more herbs are needed, selectively remove some mature leaves near the bases of branches. **Lemon Verbena, Kafir Lime Leaves, Bay Laurel**

The above suggested practices are based on experience by L. M. Loeb of the Lazy Susan Ranch, an herb farm located in Napa County.

Additional Reading:

Encyclopedia of Herbs and Their Uses – The Herb Society of America, Dorling Kindersley, New York.

The Random House Book of Herbs – Roger Phillips and Nicky Foy, Random House, New York. A good general reference book.

The Herb Companion – A great magazine, gorgeous illustrations, with fascinating articles on herbs.

www.HerbWorld.com – web site for commercial people, has links to other sites.

Reviewed by Dean Donaldson, Farm Advisor