



Fall's cooler days find me in a gathering mood. Crisp mornings call me to gather my thoughts over a cup of tea. The coming holidays bring parties and dinners where I'll gather with friends. And like all herb gardeners, I enjoy gathering the harvest from my year-long labors.

What better way to combine

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# Good Taste

these autumn activities than to make gifts for those you love from the oregano and basil in your garden? In this article I'll outline basic harvesting techniques and show you how to combine the results into a tasteful gift. But even if you don't have herbs in your garden or on the patio, read on. I've provided sources for bulk herbs you can use instead.

## MAKING THE CUT

The first step to making your garden gifts is harvesting your herbs. Use sharp clippers so you don't mangle the stems. Have something to carry the clipped herbs: a large basket, bucket or grocery bag will do the trick. And of course you'll want garden gloves to protect your hands.

Harvesting herbs is as easy as cutting flowers. Cut about one third to one half of perennial herbs such as oregano, rosemary, and thyme, leaving at least 8 inches of the base. Basil, chervil and other annual herbs grown for their leaves can be harvested before the first frost. Wait until they have reached at least half of their mature height before making your first cut. Gathering dill, caraway and other seed herbs requires timing. Watch for the seedheads to plump and turn brown. Clip the heads immediately or you'll lose your harvest to hungry birds. Harvest edible herb flowers such as lavender, borage and calendula (pot marigold) when the flowers have just opened. The heads will be firm and at maximum flavor. Handle them gently to minimize damage.

For all your herbs, harvest only parts that are in good condition. Leaves, seeds, or flowers that are damaged or show signs of stress won't improve after they're clipped.

## TIPS ON DRYING HERBS

Harvesting was the easy part. Now you've got to do something with those luscious mounds of herbs. The trick is to dry them quickly so they don't mold without using high heat (over 180 degrees F) that can drive out the flavor. Here's three of the best ways to dry them for future use.

**String Them Up** — Gather three to four stems and wrap them together at the base with a rubber band. As the stems shrink, the rubber band will contract with them. Run a string between the stems and around the rubber band to form a loop for hanging. Suspend in a dust-free area with good circulation. Avoid this technique with high-moisture herbs, such as basil or scented geraniums, as they'll dry unevenly or decay.

**Spreading Out** — Screen drying is closest to the technique the pros use. Take an old window screen or large kitchen cooling rack and place it on a support to allow for air circulation. If you don't have screens or racks, use an absorbent terrycloth towel. Spread the herb stalks in a single layer. Rustle the herbs daily to promote even drying. Allow them to dry for six to 12 days until the leaves are crackly. In humid weather, use a small fan to keep air moving and prevent mold.

**Speed Drying** — Using your microwave for drying is fast, but requires more care. Before putting herbs in the microwave, remove the leaves from their stems. Spread a handful on a paper towel. Microwave on high for one to two minutes at a time. Stir the leaves and repeat until they crumble easily.

Once your herbs are dry, remove the leaves from the stems and store in an airtight container. The best ones are wide-mouth glass jars. Zip-lock bags may be used, but plan on transferring the contents in a few weeks to something more airtight.

## GIFTS IN GOOD TASTE

After your herbs are harvested, it's time to decide what gift to make. I've provided six recipes to inspire you, but feel free to scout for your own.

Unless you have boundless space and time you will need to supplement your home-grown harvest. Some herbs don't grow well in your area. You also may want to add tropical spices, such as black pepper or cloves, or items impossible to make at home, such as garlic powder.

Here are some on-line sources you can use to buy what you need.

**Frontier Natural Brands, [www.frontiercoop.com](http://www.frontiercoop.com)**

Monterey Bay Spice Company, [www.herbco.com](http://www.herbco.com)

Penn Herb Company, Ltd. [www.pennherb.com](http://www.pennherb.com)

Penzeys Spices, [www.penzeys.com](http://www.penzeys.com)

San Francisco Herb & Natural Food Company, [www.herbspice.com](http://www.herbspice.com)

Use quality dried herbs and spices. Buy ingredients in bulk, preferably from a source that specializes in aromatic botanicals. Resist the urge to use old spices from your cupboard or marked-down herbs that are past their prime. The quality of your materials will be reflected in the flavor of your final mix. The nose knows...and so do the taste buds.

When purchasing herbs or spices in bulk, you'll find they are sold by weight. But most recipes (mine included) specify quantities by volume. Rarely will a supplier provide the key to converting ounces to cups. Uncertain how much to buy, I've often over-purchased. That is, until I hauled out my kitchen scale and did some testing.

After measuring a range of ingredients I've developed the following two rules-of-thumb. For leafy herbs or herb flowers one ounce equals one cup, for ground spices or seeds two ounces equals one cup. Use this when calculating how much to buy for a recipe.

To assemble, gather all the materials. Check to be sure you have enough before mixing. Combine all ingredients in a large bowl. Keep everything dry to prevent clumping. Mix thoroughly and store in an airtight container. Mixtures can be packaged in small screwtop jelly jars. Label with the ingredients and brief directions.

For each gift, provide about a cup and a half, enough to last a year. Seasoning mixes lose potency after that. Package your mix in something festive and include instructions or recipe suggestions on a notecard. You'll have a tasteful gift ready for holiday gatherings with those you love. **TG**