

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Using Herbs and Spices to Flavor Foods: Purchasing and Storing

Nutrition and Meal Management

Purpose: This handout provides good practices for purchasing and storing herbs and spices.

Herbs and spices have been used in food preparation for thousands of years. Herbs are green leaves or stems of plants, such as annuals, shrubs, trees, and grasses. Spices are parts of a plant that are fragrant, such as the bark, roots, seeds, or the fruit. These flavorful plants reduce the need to add salt and sugar to foods.

Herbs can be fresh, dried, or frozen. Commonly used herbs include cilantro, chives, basil, oregano, tarragon, rosemary, thyme, and sage. Spices can be whole or ground. Some commonly used spices include cinnamon, chili powder, mustard, onion powder, garlic powder, coriander, nutmeg, cloves, and turmeric.

Different flavors can result from different combinations of herbs and spices. Sweet potatoes can be prepared with a small amount of brown sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg for a sweeter flavoring. Sweet potatoes can also become a savory dish if garlic powder, paprika, and thyme are used instead.

How to Find and Store Fresh Herbs and Spices

Fresh herbs are found in the produce sections of grocery stores, farmer's markets, and garden centers. When purchasing herbs, look for plants that are green and vibrant with a refreshing smell. Avoid herbs that appear limp or brown, as they will not give the same flavor as fresh, healthy herbs. Herbs can also be found in tubes and jars in the produce section. While these types of packaged herbs are not exactly fresh, they have not been dried and processed. This results in the flavor being closer to that of a fresh herb.

Storage time for herbs will vary depending upon the plant. Basil, parsley, and cilantro can be stored in water, like flowers, or placed in a plastic bag for refrigeration. They will typically last up to a week when stored in this manner. Heartier, woody herbs like rosemary and thyme do not need to be stored in water. Still, they may last longer when stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. When herbs begin to turn brown, become limp, or grow mold on the leaves and stems, it is time to toss them out.

Another option to store fresh herbs is to freeze them. Freeze herbs when they have a healthy, green appearance. Herbs can be frozen directly in plastic freezer bags or glass jars. Another freezing method is to finely chop herbs or blend slightly and chill using an ice cube tray. Be sure to spray the ice cube tray with nonstick cooking spray. Once the herbs are frozen using this method, they can be transferred to a freezer bag for storage. This method is an easy way to freeze combinations of herbs, such as basil and oregano, which can be quickly added to sauces or soups.

Some spices can also be purchased fresh. Ginger, garlic, and nutmeg are typically available fresh in the produce section of a supermarket. These spices can be stored in the refrigerator and chopped, grated, or minced for recipes.

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How to Find and Store Dried Herbs and Spices

Dried herbs and spices are typically found in the center aisles of a grocery store, usually in a baking section. Dried herbs and spices can also be found in the produce section. Dried herbs and spices have a longer shelf life, usually six months to one year, and should be stored in a cool dark place. Dried products can be purchased as powders, leaves, crystals, or seeds.

Several different methods can make dried herbs. Hanging fresh herbs in a room no warmer than 86 °F will usually take about a week to dry. Herbs can also be dried on a rack in the sun. Using the oven to dry herbs is another method; however, it is not recommended because it causes loss of flavor. Microwaves are another method used for drying herbs. Simply place fresh herbs on a paper towel and microwave until the herb has dried out. The amount of time varies, so keep a close eye when using this method. Be sure to harvest herbs for drying before the plant produces flowers. Always check with your licensing or other regulatory agency to determine any requirements for drying herbs.

Utilizing these good practices for purchasing and storing herbs and spices will help to maintain the flavor for use in meal preparation. For more ways to add herbs and spices, check out the *Grab and Go Lesson, Using Herbs and Spice to Flavor Foods: Enhancing Flavor and Appeal*.

References

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