

## PREPARING AND SELLING HERBS AND DRIED FLOWERS

By Pat Christy

### **DRIED CULINARY HERBS & SEEDS**

There is an ever-increasing demand for culinary herbs as Americans become more familiar with European cooking and as the need for flavor in "salt-free" diets becomes more important. Their profitability at community garden fund-raising events can be illustrated by the fact that a ¼ oz. of Sweet basil sells for 90cents at the supermarket – one single Basil plant will yield 5 times this amount of dried leaf material. And of course, organically grown herbs will have even more appeal.

How To Dry Herbs – Herbs that are grown for their foliage should be cut and harvested at the first sign of flower buds forming on the plant. It is at that stage of growth their leaves are at their peak of aromatic oils and flavor. Herbs are harvested on a clear, early morning as soon as the dew has dried off. Herbs cut in late afternoon and allowed to dry in the excessive heat of the full sun, not only lose much of their potency, but the foliage becomes faded and unattractive. Avoid the rough handling of the herb foliage; it results in the leaves being shattered and falling. Herb foliage is cut from the plant with sufficiently long stems so that they can be tied in bunches and hung to dry.



The important point to remember is that herbs, which are being dried, should be protected from the direct rays of the sun and provided with a good circulation of air. A drying temperature of around 75 degrees seems to give the best results. With good air circulation and dry weather most herbs will be sufficiently dry for processing in 7 or 8 days. Avoid drying herbs in a place of excessive heat; where the temperature rises above 100 degrees, the herbs will begin to lose the essential oils.

Herbs can also be dried in brown paper bags: whole plants cut for a late harvest should be pulled up and the roots cut off. Then wash them and hang up in bunches to drip dry. Put each bunch, about the amount you can hold in one hand, upside down in a large brown paper bag. Close the mouth of the bag around the stems with an elastic or string. Let the bunches dry completely in the bags – whether it takes a week or a month. When ready to finish processing, rub the bag between your palms and the leaves will drop to the bottom. If they are not crisp enough to crumble through a strainer of large mesh or grind in a mortar with a pestle, complete drying in a cool oven.

Processing – After the leaves have thoroughly dried, they are stripped from the stems into a large container. To remove broken stems and other foreign material, sift the mixture through a coarse screen. If it is not thoroughly cleaned by the first screening, give it a second screening which should leave nothing but the herb leaves. Take the dried herb leaves and store them in tightly sealed jar or package in a dark place away from the direct rays of the sun.

How To Process Seeds – Among the most popular herbs grown for their savory seeds, are Dill, Anise, Caraway, Cumin, Sesame, Coriander, and sometimes Mustard. Seeds should be thoroughly ripened; test the plants by gently tapping them, and if the seeds start falling, they are ready to harvest.

**Packaging** – For the beginner we recommend putting his dried herbs and savory seed into the small poly or cello bags that can be heat-sealed and then stapled to heavy cardboard cards. This is inexpensive packaging and if neatly assembled it is effective and will sell a lot of herbs. This gives you an opportunity to offer whole leaf, fresh or dried herbs. Usually 5 different types of the better selling herbs are stapled in rows of 10 on a 12” by 18” display card. Each small bag of herbs should contain exactly a ¼ oz. Of herb material to comply with state and local requirements. A reasonably priced scale can be a good investment. The display card Parsley, Italian, Petroselinum hortense filicinum; 2 ft; germination 4-6 weeks; seeds should be soaked in warm water before planting outdoors in the early spring; thin seedlings to 3” apart; likes cold weather and tolerates more shade than most herbs; prefers a rich, well-drained loam with lots of humus; start in August for window gardens in the winter; wash leaves frequently with water to discourage insects; is the only leafy herb that can be dried for 5 minutes in a 400 degree oven; can also be dried in a week in an open dish in the refrigerator; has 3 times as much Vitamin C as oranges, weight for weight, plus much Vitamin A and iron; can be cooked for its pleasant flavor as well as lending flavor to salads, soups, stews.



\*\*Pennyroyal, Hedeoma pulegiodes; 1 ft; when sown in the garden it self sows easily; tolerates dry conditions; makes a pleasant tea; repels mosquitoes and flies when leaves are rubbed on the skin.

\*\*Summer Savory, Satureja hortensis; 18 inches; germination 10 days; successive sowings from early spring; thin to 4-6 inches apart; self sows readily; use leaves fresh or dried with string beans, poultry, white fish, meat loaf and chicken soup.

#### PERENNIALS

Balm, Lemon, Melissa officinalis; 2 ft; sow in early spring in full sun or partial shade; divide clumps in early April; start new plants from runners which appear after flowering; use fresh or frozen leaves in iced tea, preserved pears, and fruit cups, will deter cats from upholstered furniture.

Bergamot, or Bee Balm, Monarda didyma; 3 ft; spreads rapidly in good soil; lift clumps in spring and set runners in a new spot; mulch with compost in the fall; the only herb with brilliant red flowers; used dried for pot pourri or flavoring in fruit cups or preserves.

\*\*Burnet, Salad, Sanguisorba minor; 18 inches; germination 10 days; sow seeds in a dry sunny spot; does not need rich soil; excellent edging for vegetable garden; fresh leaves can be snipped into salad greens for a cucumber-like flavor; the first-year plants can be treated as annuals and make a good edging for the vegetable plot.

\*\*Catnip, Nepeta cataria; 3 ft; can be sown in early spring or in September; self sows readily; survives very dry summers; plants pruned short last better through the winter; can tolerate partial shade; dry leaves for tea or to use in catnip toys; steep fresh leaves in water to use as an insect repellent; also said to repel rats.

Chamomile, Roman, Anthemis nobilis; 1 ft; apple-scented ground cover plant that in mild weather can be grown as an evergreen lawn; spreads when trodden on; must be kept well weeded; sow seeds in April on sunny site in well-drained soil mixed with peat moss; to keep evergreen in a cold winter cover with salt hay; can be brewed into a bitter tasting “Peter Rabbit Tea”; an infusion is stimulative in bath water and is used to brighten blond hair.

Chives, Allium schoenoprasum; 12 inches; for harvest the next season, sow in March or August in shallow drills; drills should be well marked to prevent the young shoots being confused with weedy sprigs of grass; sunny location and fertile soil necessary – especially so in a window’s box; to preserve the plant’s strength no part should ever be shorn

bare but odd side shoots can be cut out; fertilize occasionally; make beautiful edging plants displaying their mauve flowers in May; universally used fresh or frozen with cream cheese and vegetables and in soups and salads.

\*\*Horehound, Marrubium vulgare; 2 ft; sow in early spring or early fall in hot dry poor soil where it self sows readily; very drought resistant; horehound candy is good for coughs.

Lavender, Lavandula vera; 2½ ft; germination 6 weeks; sow in flats filled with potting soil and topped with a ½ layer of clean sand – do not over-water; young plants require mulching after ground is frozen for the first winter; prefers humusy soil with addition of limestone; flowers can be harvested in second year, preferably just before they open, and dried for use in sachets and pot pourris.

**SELLING POTTED HERBS**

At the end of the season, you may put up the herbs in the garden and sell them for kitchen window sills during the winter. Fresh herbs are always popular with good cooks, as well as providing some attractive greening indoors. Herbs in clay pots also sell well at Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Easter and Mother’s Day.

POTTING MIXTURES FOR INDOOR HERBS – A good potting mixture is essential for growing indoor plants. A good formula is: 1 part garden loam, 1 part peat moss, 1 part sand; bone meal and a small amount of blood meal can also be added; sift through a ¼ mesh screen, mix thoroughly and then sterilize it in the oven until you can detect an odor; this will kill off fungi and plant diseases.

**DRIED EVERLASTING FLOWERS**

Everlasting flowers are those varieties, which hold their shape and color when dried. They are particularly welcome during the winter months when florists are asking top dollar for fresh flowers. The following are suitable for dried bouquets:

Love-in-Mist, Nigella; 1 ft; sow outdoors in early spring; full sun; thin plants to 8” apart.

Rhodanthe, Helipterum; 1-2 ft; germination 15 days; sow outdoors in early May in full sun; thin plants to 6”-12” apart.

Rose Everlasting, Helipterum; 2 ft; germination 15 days; sow outdoors in early May in full sun; thin plants to 6”-12” apart.

Statice, Limonium; 30”; sow indoors 8 weeks before last hard frost; thin plants to 9”-12” apart.

Strawflowers, Helichrysum; 3 ft; sow indoors 4-6 weeks before last hard frost in full sun; do not overwater; thin plants to 9” apart.

Winged Everlasting, Ammobium alatum; 3 ft; sow outdoors in early May in sandy soil; full sun; thin plants to 9” apart.

Globe Amaranth, Helipterum; 2 ft; germination 15 days; sow outdoors in early May in full sun; thin plants to 6” – 12” apart.



Culture – They all need well-drained soils of average fertility. High nitrogen fertilizers must be avoided because they promote fast, soft growth. This results in weak flower stems and blooms of poor color that are slow to dry. On the other hand fertilizers that are desirable are potash and phosphates, which induce plants to produce sturdy stems, and flowers with intense, bright colors. In addition, these plants should be grown in an area that is exposed to full sun; shaded areas grow plants that give blooms with inferior colors and poor conformation. These flowers are sown and grown like any annual flower variety. The soil should be deep spaded, then worked down into a fine seedbed. The ground is now ready to be sown with seeds. Make straight, shallow furrows spaced 18 to 20 inches apart and the seeds planted ½ inch deep, then covered. When the seedlings begin to emerge, start thinning plants so that they have ample room to develop into large productive plants. FLOWERS ARE READY TO CUT when they just come into full bloom, and never in an over-ripe condition. Harvesting should be done on a dry, sunny morning after the dew has dried off from the blooms. When cutting, take as much of the stem as possible. This will induce young developing stalks emerging from the base of the plant, to grow rapidly and produce secondary crops of flowers. As the flowers are cut and harvested, they are gathered in small loose bunches, tied and taken indoor to process.

To process, place them on a table, untie each bunch, then individually take the stems and strip off their leaves. Flowers are segregated according to size and varieties, then gathered and tied into bouquets to be hung and dried. A point to note is that small flowers should be tied in tight bundles and hung head down. Flowers that produce large blooms should be hung singly, head down. Flowers dried by hanging will be ready in 10 days to 2 weeks. Drying is done in a room with a good circulation so that the plant moisture is removed rapidly and thus prevents molding. Bunched flowers are hung from the ceiling or rafters, well separated from each other for air circulation. While drying, flowers should be protected from direct sunlight to prevent blooms from fading.

DRIED FLOWER BOUQUETS are arranged so that the colors produce a harmonious effect. Always place the longer stemmed flowers on the outer circle of the bouquet with those with the shorter stems towards the center. Colors that are the same should be arranged in concentric rings around the bouquet. As each bouquet is made, wrap it in a cello-bag to protect flower heads from dust and shattering.

DRYING AGENTS – DRYONEX, a silica gel, has greatly widened the varieties of flowers that can be dried. It is light in weight, flows easily, which makes it easy to surround all parts of the flower for fast drying. In 2 or 3 days it will dry flowers that might take 10 to 15 days to dry, and what is more important, flowers not suited to air-drying can now be dried through the silica-gel compound. Hard-to-dry flowers like the rose, pansy, zinnia, violet, delphinium, etc., make good dried flowers with the use of DRYONEX.

SELLING EVERLASTING FLOWER BOUQUETS: A fast check of your local florists will give you an idea of the going prices. You may want to scrounge for old vases and jars and sell the bouquets in them at your fund-raising event, or wrap them in clear plastic. Major retail stores sell single stem flowers for \$6.00 and up.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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