

Herbs - from Season to Season

From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

by Lydia Lovell

All summer long Aunt Olivia plucked fresh herbs for lending flavors and piquancy to salads, soups, vegetables, fish and meat. But Labor Day heralds summer's end, and she knew that most plants in her herb garden had already ceased producing tender new shoots. Harvesting herbs and preparing them for use over the winter and for Christmas gift giving went on all summer but peaked in early fall.

In July, while tarragon's growth stood a foot high, enough was gathered for several uses. No more was cut after August 1st, for the plant must store energy to carry its roots through the winter. Its top dies back with frost, but spring brings it to life again.

Mulched parsley makes healthy growth well into winter; the tender fronds may reappear as the snow melts, providing a spring crop to carry you into June or July when new plants mature.

Scissor chives while still deep green; its pungent long leaves are best dried by spreading thinly in a broiling pan and roasting in a slow oven (200° to 250°), turning now and then until dry and crisp. Chives will not lose their green color if heat is kept low. To store, snip into a jar and cover tightly.

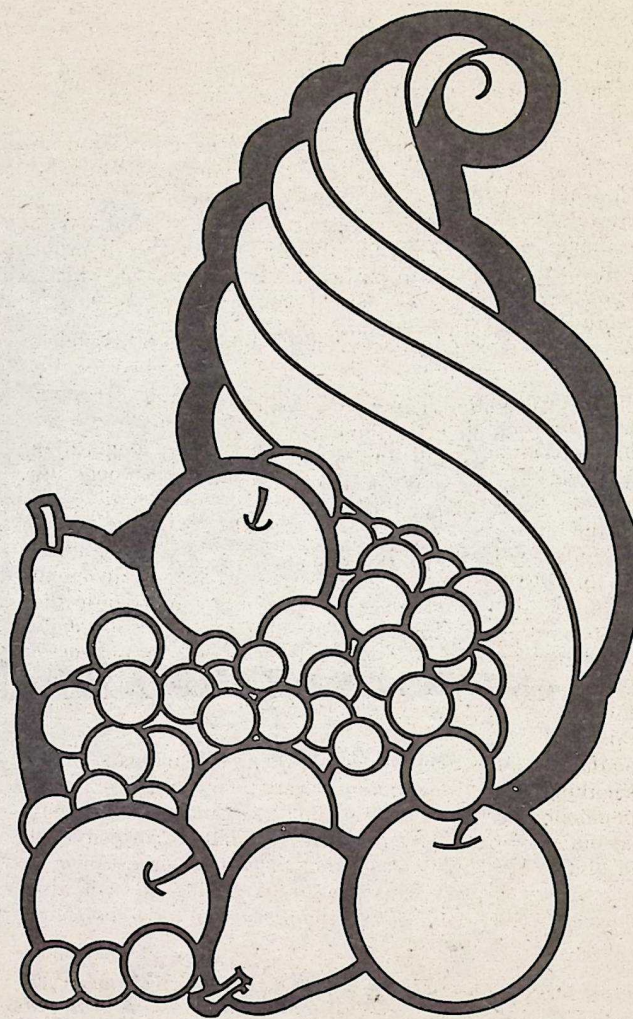
Bottled herbs retain their strengths and keep best if pulverized first. After tying in small bunches and hanging in an airy but shady place for several days until dry, strip the leaves from stems, spread leaves on a clean tea towel and place in full sunshine for about five minutes. (Leaves absorb moisture from the atmosphere; the sun dries them quickly. If left too long in the sun, leaves lose their volatile oils but brief exposure prevents mold developing during storage.)

Heap dried herbs on a level, hard surface; roll with a rolling pin until fine-crushed. Sift the pulverized leaves through a flour sifter onto a sheet of wax paper. Discard chaff in sifter and funnel sifted herb into a bone-dry jar. Cover tightly.

Whenever I empty a glass spice jar with a screw top, I squirrel it away for future use. Be sure to label bottled herbs, not only with the type but with the date. Herbs such as lemon balm, chervil, chives, parsley, tarragon and summer savory lose their freshness after about a year. Basil, lovage, sweet marjoram, the mints, oregano, and pennyroyal may retain flavor longer but some of their strengths will fade with time. Sage, thyme, and rosemary will still be aromatic after two years if prepared and stored properly.

Bottled blends of herbs make particularly welcome gifts at holiday times. Blends may be added to stews, soups and chowders, or sprinkled on roasts. When gift wrapping home-blended herbs, write on a card suggestions for use, or include a recipe and a few interesting facts about the herbs. Your thoughtfulness will truly be appreciated.

Many herb blends are improved if dried celery is added. Unless you grow your own, save celery leaves whenever you buy a bunch. Dry and pulverize them just as you do other herbs.



This **Hamburger Blend** of herbs enhances ground beef flavors. Use it, too, in meat loaf or for spaghetti and meat balls. Combine and mix well the pulverized leaves of the following herbs.

4 t. marjoram	1/4 t. thyme
2 t. celery	1/4 t. lovage
6 t. parsley	1/8 t. sage

Measure herbs, mix, store in tightly covered jar, labeled and dated.

Directions: Use 1 level teaspoon to each pound of meat; add salt, pepper and dry mustard as desired. Yield: a winter's supply.

For **Fish Herbs**, combine the following pulverized leaves:

1 t. tarragon	1/4 t. thyme
4 t. parsley	1/4 t. lemon balm
2 t. summer savory	1/2 t. celery

Directions: Use a level teaspoon for each pound of fish or pint of chowder. Note: Substitute dill for tarragon if you prefer.

To produce a fine **Roast Beef Blend** or to flavor soup made with beef stock, combine the following:

2 t. celery or lovage	1 t. pennyroyal
2 t. parsley	2 t. marjoram or oregano
2 t. chives	

Directions: Use a level teaspoon to a pint of soup stock or sprinkle a teaspoon of this herb blend over a roast during the last 20 minutes of cooking. Baste roast with pan juices at end of cooking period; gravy will need no further seasoning.

You can buy poultry seasoning to put in stuffing, of course. Or you can blend your own and enjoy unique flavors. Aunt Olivia sometimes varied the quantities of herbs she blended to avoid any possible monotony. You may prefer a poultry seasoning with more (or less) sage, for example, or with only half as much thyme. Experiment! Live dangerously! Tickle your taste buds with tantalizing trials! Create your own **Poultry Seasoning**.

1 1/2 t. sage (+/-)	1 t. thyme (+/-)
1 t. lovage	4 t. parsley (+/-)
1 t. celery	2 t. chives

Directions: Use a level teaspoon to each cup of dry bread-crumbs. Or use 3/4 teaspoon and add 1/4 t. dry mustard. Or blend in 2 t. dry mustard when preparing your own poultry seasoning blend.

There is nothing magical about herb blends or about herbs for enhancing eating pleasures. Let your own nostrils and the tip of your tongue be your guide. Keep in mind that when you use a dried, pulverized, bottled herb, you need only a quarter as much as you would use of the fresh herb. A little goes a long way. It is not your intention to add sufficient herb to be identifiable; the idea is to put only enough flavor in a food to bring out its own best qualities of taste.

Think of using herbs as an artist uses accent colors: scarlet pillows tossed on a white couch put punch into a room. A streak of lime green against navy blue brightens an otherwise dull coverlet. Splash drab olive green with orange to spark brightness on a wall.

And do the same with food. Lift carrots to new heights with parsley. Give peas a jolt with chives. Electrify salads with garlic. Not with quantity . . . a smidgeon, a hint, an elusive trace. . . .

When you first begin using fresh herbs, you may feel little confidence in your own judgment, but the more often you try different combinations, the more versatile you'll discover herbs to be. Not only will you be delighted with the results, but all who share meals you prepare will find new joys at your table.