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# COOKING WITH HERBS



Maximize the wonderful flavours of your herbs by making sure that you prepare them just before use. Choose fresh herbs that are bright in colour and have no wilted leaves. Most herbs are very delicate and will only last a day or two. Chop or tear the herbs as you need them because the longer you leave them on the chopping board, the more flavour they will lose.

## STORING

Most herbs are best kept fresh by storing in a plastic bag in the bottom of the fridge. Coriander and rosemary are best stored by placing the stems in a glass of cold water, while parsley can either be kept in the fridge or sprinkled with water and wrapped in paper towels.

## PREPARING AND USING FRESH HERBS

### *Stripping the leaves*

Some herbs, such as chervil and coriander, have soft stems that can be chopped and cooked along with the leaves, but most stems are tough and woody and the leaves need to be stripped from the stems before cooking. To strip tough stems, hold the bottom of the stem firmly in one hand and use the thumb and forefinger of the

other hand on either side of the stem to pinch the leaves off as you drag the stem towards you.

With tender stems such as dill and fennel, strip the leaves from the bottom of the stem, pulling the leaf sprays away from the main stem and stripping out any tough stems from the sprays as you work.

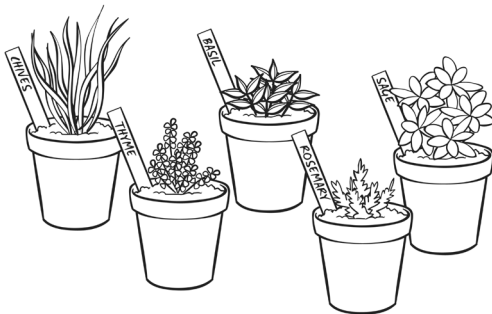
### *Making a paste*

Herbs can be pounded into a paste using a mortar and pestle. You could use a food processor, but if you only want herbs for one dish, a mortar and pestle is much less hard work on the washing up.

### *Chopping leaves*

The flavour of herbs is found in the essential oils they contain, but the more surface area exposed in chopping, the more essential oils are lost. So, if you chop herbs very finely, you may discover that they lose a great deal of their flavour in cooking, whereas if you roughly chop your herbs you will find that they keep their flavour for longer in the cooking process.

A large, sharp knife is all you need for chopping herbs, but some cooks swear by a mezzaluna, a curved two-handed chopper that slices with a rocking motion, backwards and forwards.



If you use a large knife, the best method of chopping herbs is to lay the herbs on your chopping board and, with one hand holding the point of the blade on the surface of the board over the herbs, use the other hand to chop up and down in a rocking motion, back and forth over the herbs. When you have gone from one side of the herbs to the other, pile them together again and repeat as necessary until they are chopped as finely as you need them.

## DRYING HERBS

Not all herbs respond well to drying. Those with tough, woody stems, such as oregano and thyme, dry well and retain their flavour. Those with softer stems, such as basil and parsley, lose their flavour almost completely (but remember, you can freeze the softer herb, see page 67). For the best flavour, dry herbs just before their flower buds open, when their essential oils are at their highest concentration.

When preparing herbs for drying, make sure you discard any discoloured leaves. Tie the herbs together in small bunches and hang in a well-ventilated, cool place, out of direct sunlight. You will know the herbs are dry when the leaves feel brittle. Strip the leaves from the stems and store in an airtight container.

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### Cook's Tip

*To microwave-dry your herbs, scatter a handful of leaves on a double layer of kitchen towel and microwave on high for two and a half minutes, then store in an airtight container.*

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