

**Herbs for the Holidays** (published 2024-11-23)

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With the holiday season approaching, I am filled with anticipation to gather around festive tables where delicious meals and cherished stories are shared with beloved family and friends. My personal philosophy on food is rooted in the idea of “all good things in moderation” — a principle I often champion in our Extension nutrition programs. It's about finding balance, allowing us to savor the flavors of the season while nurturing our well-being. One delicious way to enhance holiday dishes without overloading on salt is by using herbs!

### **Ditch the Salt: Try Herbs Instead**

Fresh herbs enhance the flavor of dishes and drinks, providing a healthier alternative to salt. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), nearly half of American adults have high blood pressure, often due to excessive sodium intake. AHA recommends a daily limit of 2,300 mg of sodium (about 1 teaspoon of salt), with an ideal target of 1,500 mg for most adults. Americans typically consume more than double the ideal limit each day.

### **Tips for Reducing Sodium**

Much of the sodium in our diets comes from packaged and/or processed foods, not the salt shaker. To cut down on sodium:

- **Check nutrition labels** for sodium content, especially in canned and frozen goods. Opt for “low-sodium” or “no salt added” versions.
- **Flavor with herbs and spices** instead of salt.

### **Spotlight on Herbs**

Herbs not only add flavor but can also transform your cooking. Here's a quick guide to using some popular herbs:

- **Rosemary** is a hardy, aromatic shrub native to the Mediterranean, features short needle-like leaves and woody stems. Known for its distinct woody, sage-like flavor, it pairs beautifully with olive oil, garlic, roasted meats, poultry, root vegetables, pork, and lamb. Often used in savory dishes like breads and stews, rosemary's strong flavor should be used with discretion. Use the tender, non-wood branches and leaves fresh, or dry and store them in an airtight container.
- **Thyme**, a versatile Mediterranean herb, offers an earthy, slightly lemony flavor that enhances savory dishes, including meats, poultry, fish, eggs, soups, and vegetables like mushrooms and potatoes. Use fresh, or preserve by drying stems on newspaper, then removing the leaves and storing them in an airtight container.
- **Mint**: Fresh and bright, mint enhances beverages, desserts, and sauces. With over 35 varieties, it's best grown in containers since it can be invasive.

### **Storing Fresh Herbs**

To make the most of your herbs, store them properly:

1. **Soft herbs (like mint, cilantro, and parsley):** Remove any rubber bands, wash gently, and spin dry. Trim the stems, place in a jar with water, and cover loosely with a plastic bag.
2. **Hardy herbs (like rosemary and thyme):** Wrap in damp paper towels and store in a resealable bag in the refrigerator.

### **Cooking with Fresh vs. Dried Herbs**

- **Fresh herbs:** Best for uncooked dishes (like salads) or added at the end of cooking to preserve their bright flavors. Use three times the amount of fresh herbs if a recipe calls for dried.
- **Dried herbs:** Concentrated and robust, ideal for slow-cooked dishes like stews and casseroles. Add them early in the cooking process to release their flavors.
- In general, use only 1/2 to 1/3 as much dried herb compared to fresh in a recipe. If a recipe calls for 1 tablespoon of a fresh herb, use only a teaspoon.

### **Herb and Spice Pairings for Proteins and Vegetables**

Enhance your dishes with these herb combinations:

- **Proteins:**
  - Beef: Bay leaf, thyme, sage
  - Chicken: Rosemary, oregano, paprika
  - Fish: Dill, mustard, pepper
  - Pork: Garlic, sage, oregano
- **Vegetables:**
  - Carrots: Cinnamon, ginger, dill
  - Potatoes: Paprika, garlic, parsley
  - Tomatoes: Basil, oregano, thyme

Creating your own spice blends helps control sodium and additives. Here are a couple of easy-to-make blends:

#### **Salt-Free Seasoning:**

- 1 tsp dried thyme
- 2 tsp dry mustard
- ½ tsp oregano
- ½ tsp onion powder
- 1½ tsp garlic powder
- 2 tsp paprika

#### **Recipe Highlight: Rosemary Chili Nuts**

Skip the cordial cherries and add a savory crunch to your holiday spread with these spiced nuts.

**Ingredients:**

- 1 tbsp olive oil
- ½ pound (approximately 2 cups) walnuts or almonds
- 3 sprigs fresh rosemary, chopped (or 1 tbsp dried)
- 1 tsp crushed chili flakes
- ½ tsp salt

**Directions:**

1. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add nuts, stirring to coat.
2. Mix in rosemary, chili flakes, and salt. Cook for 15 minutes, stirring frequently to avoid burning.
3. For extra heat, try using chili-infused olive oil.

By using herbs instead of salt, you can enjoy flavorful dishes that are healthier for your heart. So, as you gather around the table this holiday season, embrace the rich tastes and aromas that fresh herbs bring.

**How do I ask a question?**

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.