

As Winter Approaches, What to Do with Herbs? (published 2026-10-31)

By Joy Moore, Master Gardener

As the days get shorter and nighttime temps start to drop, herb lovers scurry - harvesting basil for pesto, snipping some extra sage to dry, and surveying the herb garden to decide how to best help our plants get through the winter.

It is not too late to harvest and preserve some of your herbal bounty. Go ahead and cut basil and other annuals before nighttime temps get below 50 degrees. You can still do some light snipping of perennial herbs for drying, but heavier pruning should not be done past September 1 in our area, since pruning later can encourage tender new growth that won't have time to harden off before cold weather sets in.

For drying or freezing, the best time to harvest is mid morning just after the dew dries. Drying is the traditional method of herb preservation. The simplest way to dry herbs is to tie them in small bundles and hang upside down in a dark, warm, well-ventilated place or spread them out to dry on a dish towel on a rack. Once dry, strip the leaves from the stems. Leave dry herbs whole until you are ready to use to maintain maximum potency. Store in glass jars with tight fitting lids away from heat and light. They will retain their flavors for 6 to 12 months. One teaspoon dried herb equals one tablespoon chopped fresh herb. Sage, rosemary, thyme, oregano, lemon verbena, mint, and chives all dry well.

To freeze, strip clean leaves from stems. Chop coarsely. Mix with a little water and spoon into ice cube trays. When frozen, remove to freezer bags. Many herbs also freeze well when chopped and moistened with a little oil. This process is good for preserving herb pastes like pesto or salsa verde. Herbs become limp when thawed and are best used in cooked dishes. Frozen herbs can be used in the same proportion as fresh herbs. Freezing works well for basil, cilantro, parsley, dill, mint, and chives.

As we think about helping our herbs survive cold weather, the good news is that many perennial herbs are winter hardy in our area and can be left in the garden. Tough herbs like sage, oregano, chives, thyme, mint, sorrel and lovage fare well outside if you start out with healthy plants and ensure they have good drainage. Remember not to prune (except for light harvesting for use) or fertilize after September 1. Leave dead foliage standing over winter for protection. Mulch lightly.

Others herbs are sensitive to frost or severely cold weather and need protection or to be brought inside. When deciding what herbs to bring indoors, don't bother with annuals. Their lives are about over. If you want to grow those herbs indoors over winter, start new plants from seeds or cuttings. This includes basil, usually grown as an annual, though technically a short-lived tender perennial.

Instead focus your over wintering efforts on tender or marginally hardy perennials. Rosemary, bay laurel, lemon verbena, Spanish and French lavenders, lemon grass and pineapple sage are hardy to zone 8; they can't withstand temperatures below 20°. Though they might survive in a protected spot or in a mild winter, it is safer to take them inside. Note that lemon verbena is deciduous; it will lose all of its leaves indoors. Scented geraniums are killed at 32°. Basils and stevia suffer if the temperature goes below 50°.

Growing tender herbs in pots makes bringing them inside easier. If your herbs are not already in pots, you can dig up the whole plant or start new plants from cuttings.

A few guidelines for growing in pots:

1. Beat the frost. Bring them in when daytime temps are 65-70° F.
2. Move plants indoors gradually, mirroring spring hardening-off steps – move first to shade, then indoors.
3. Choose the right pot. Choose a container slightly larger than the root ball. If your home is hot and dry, choose plastic pots; if cool and humid use clay. Be sure your pots have drainage holes.
4. Use a good potting mix with good drainage. Don't use garden soil in containers.
5. Clean your herbs before bringing inside. Spray gently with a hose or insecticidal soap.
6. For best results replicate outdoor growing conditions as much as possible. Herbs need 4-6 hours of sun. Place in a south or west facing window or under grow lights. Good drainage is essential; never leave them sitting in water.
7. Begin to fertilize only when active growth resumes in late winter. Fertilize weakly - once a month half-strength.

Herbs grown indoors will be less productive than outdoors and are best used fresh.

Resources

“Growing Culinary Herbs in Tennessee Gardens,”

<https://uthort.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/228/2024/07/W1225B.pdf>

“Winterizing the Herb Garden,”

<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/winterizing-the-herb-garden>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at 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.