



## Herb Harvesting

by Marilyn Loser

2017 August 2

The late July rain has made our yard green and lush. I'm spending little time watering and more time weeding! But weeding isn't the only happening. It's herb harvest time.

I have perennial culinary sage (*Salvia officinalis*), French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus 'Sativa'*), and spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) that I pick, dry, and store for winter usage. I find they have the best fragrance and flavor this time of the summer. In August they begin to wilt and the leaves seem tougher and less tasty.

There are a number of sage varieties, but I've had the best experience with solid colored ones. The plants grow 1-2 feet high and about 1 foot wide in my garden. Several sources suggest replacing sage plants every 3-4 years as they seem to wear out. Around Thanksgiving grocery stores often offer planted pots of mixed herbs. If you have a sunny window sill you can over winter these herbs and then plant them in the garden the following summer. I do this often enough to keep healthy sage growing in the garden. Sage is often used in poultry stuffing but goes well with most meats. Italians use it with pasta and gnocchi.

Our French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus 'Sativa'*) is clump forming, usually grows 2-3 ft high, and doesn't spread crazily. In fact, it rarely flowers and never produces seeds according to the Bonnie Plants website. New plants must be produced from rooted cuttings – I received mine from a friend and am happy to share. I also have Russian tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculoides Pursch*) that is seed grown and has a less desirable flavor. However, I rarely have to give it a splash of water and it forms a nice clump of 4- ft tall green in a dry part of the yard. Tarragon has a sweet, delicate licorice taste and I love it with artichokes and in béarnaise sauce.

We keep mint in a separate small garden as it does spread by runners. It needs little care and comes back year after year. It grows about 1 ft high. It's great with fresh fruit and in mint jelly with lamb.

To harvest the above herbs, I cut stems and hang them upside down in a paper bag or cardboard box and store in a cool, dark place for two weeks or so. If our wet weather continues, it may take longer this season. After they dry, I pull off leaves and store them in air tight jars or plastic bags. The flavor lasts longer if kept away from light and heat.

Another herb I dry is rosemary (*Rosemarinus officinalis*). While it is perennial in locations such as Albuquerque, our winters are too cold so I plant it in a pot and bring it in over the winter. Sometimes it dies out – I've never figured out why – so I always dry some as described above. I love it with lamb (yes, I love lamb) in soups, stews, and eaten on hardy bread with olive oil.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) are another perennial that spreads easily. It forms lush grass like clumps that rise from a cluster of small bulbs. It also reseeds. Most folks are familiar with the herb's light oniony flavor on baked potatoes with sour cream. Chives are also excellent in salads. I find it easy to chop and freeze in small plastics bags. To me dried are flavorless.

Sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is an annual and is my favorite herb. I used to grow it from seed in the garden, but am now more likely to buy plants, place them in large pots, and grow them year around. Outdoors, basil freezes at the thought of a freeze! I move pots indoors when needed. A warning: they are subject to white flies and aphids when grown indoors.

Sweet basil is associated with Italian cooking. My favorite use is in traditional pesto (with olive oil, pine nuts, and Parmesan) and in tomato pesto (with olive oil, sun-dried tomatoes, and Balsamic vinegar). Other forms of basil are Thai, lemon, and holy. If I have more basil than I need for pesto, I freeze it in olive oil or water. It turns mushy and black if frozen alone and lacks flavor if dried. Basil frozen in water works well in soups and stews (some freeze it in ice-cube trays so they can remove measured amount); that frozen in olive oil can be used in dips or over pasta.

A number of websites suggest harvesting herbs just before or after blooming. I find them to be at their best before blooming. Seems to me energy goes into the blooms and the herb leaves are less flavorful after blooming.

*"Royboy, do you ever feel useless?" Reply: "Sure, sometimes. But then I remember I breathe out carbon dioxide for plants."* From the Courier comic strip 'Soup to Nutz'