

Capturing the Essence of Herbs

Presented by Susan Belsinger

Our basic herb recipes will guide you in using your fresh herbs in inspired infusions such as herbal vinegars for sublime salad dressings and in herb syrups that can be used to fashion a libation or to glaze your favorite cake. We also discuss how to prepare herb butters to have on hand for seasoning winter vegetables or adding a finishing touch to homemade biscuits. You can capture herbal essences in aromatic pastes that can be frozen and used as needed to add fresh, bright flavor to sauces (for example, basil paste used in pesto), soups, and baked goods. These easy-to-follow, “building block” recipes will have you enjoying your fresh harvested herbs in every season. These recipes are excerpted from *Grow Your Own Herbs* by Susan Belsinger and Arthur O. Tucker, Timber Press 2019.

Herb Syrups

We have been capturing the essence of herbs in herb syrups for many decades. Syrups are a gratifying and easy way to enjoy seasonal herbs and to preserve them throughout the year. Once you have these syrups on hand, you will find all sorts of ways to use them. We create delightful beverages with them from natural sodas to luscious cocktails, or simply add them to a cup of hot tea or the iced tea pitcher. Herb-flavored syrups are wonderful in fruit salads or used to perk up a not-so-ripe melon or pineapple. Their flavor and aroma will bring a brightness to many dishes.

Any kind of sugar can be used in making herb syrups, but we prefer organic cane sugar. Darker sugars, honey, and maple syrup can also be used, but these sweeteners have strong flavors that may dominate the flavor of the herbs. Stevia will sweeten, but it is an herb leaf itself and the result will be more like an infusion than a syrup consistency; it would have to be refrigerated and used within two days.

Simple Herb Syrup

Makes about 2 cups

A simple syrup is generally made with a 1:1 ratio of water to sugar. For a richer herb syrup, the sugar can be doubled; the ratio would be 1 part water to 2 parts sugar. This will result in a thicker, much sweeter syrup.

1 1/2 cups water

1 1/2 cups organic sugar

8 to 10 herb sprigs or a large handful of herb leaves (see accompanying sidebar for suggestions)

Combine the water and sugar in a small saucepan, and bring to a simmer over medium heat, stirring constantly with a spoon. When the sugar has dissolved, remove the pan from the heat and add the herbs. Bruise the herbs against the side of the pan with the back of the spoon. Cover the

pan and let stand for at least thirty minutes, or until cool. Using a slotted spoon or strainer, gather the leaves and squeeze them to extract their essence into the syrup, then discard the leaves. Pour into clean, airtight containers and label. This syrup can be kept in the refrigerator for ten to fourteen days.

We often freeze herbal syrups in pint or quart canning jars. When freezing, leave a generous 1-inch headspace in the jar, since the liquid will expand when frozen. Label the jars, because the contents tend to look alike once frozen. Store in the freezer up to one year. If using the whole jar, just remove it from the freezer and let it thaw on the counter at room temperature. If you need just a bit (say, enough to glaze a batch of muffins), place the jar in a bowl of warm water (not hot) until partially melted. Pour off what you need and return the jar to the freezer.

Fresh herbs to use for syrups

The amounts of herbs and flowers used in herb syrups vary, depending on the flavor of each herb. The listed herbs are calculated in sprigs, most 4 to 5 inches long, which will yield the appropriate amount for the Simple Herb Syrup recipe. Sprigs of shorter herbs such as thyme might only be 3 to 4 inches long. These amounts of herbs and flowers will produce a well-balanced, nicely flavored syrup. You can use more herbs or flowers, but you will get a more concentrated syrup, which may need to be diluted, depending on its use.

Basil: about 8 sprigs of anise, cinnamon, green, or lemon basil, or a handful of flowers

Bay laurel: 6 to 8 leaves

German chamomile: about 2 tablespoons fresh flowers

Lavender: 8 to 10 flower spikes, or 1 scant tablespoon fresh flowers

Lemon balm, lemon thyme, or lemon verbena: 10 to 12 sprigs

Lemongrass: about 1/2 cup minced stems

Mint: about 12 sprigs of orange mint, peppermint, or spearmint, or a handful of flowers

Rosemary: 5 to 6 sprigs, or a handful of flowers

Sage: about 4 common sage sprigs, or 6 fruit-scented or pineapple sage sprigs

Scented geranium: a handful of flowers, or 12 to 15 leaves (can be bitter)

Mexican tarragon: 7 to 8 sprigs

Viola: violets or pansies, use a large handful of fresh flowers

Herb seeds: about 1 tablespoon bruised coriander or fennel seeds (slightly green are best; they should be simmered gently in syrup for ten minutes)

Herb Vinegars

Creating herbal infusions is a pleasure for the herb gardener, and is a simple, straightforward way to concentrate herb flavor and store it for a year. Harvesting leaves and flowers of homegrown herbs when the plants are at their aromatic peak and soaking them in good-quality vinegar for four to six weeks are all that is necessary to accomplish this agreeable task. Part of the fun of making vinegars is experimenting with different herbs. Often, a combination of two or three herbs offers a pleasant surprise. The herbal vinegars you make will enhance salads and sauces for months to come.

Some good choices of herbs for making vinegars are basil, especially the purple varieties since they tinge the vinegar a gorgeous ruby-red color; chive with chive blossoms, since the flowers will also give clear vinegar a lavender hue; dill; all of the lemon herbs; lovage; mints; nasturtium flowers; oregano; tarragon; and savory. Generally, we recommend combining no more than three to four herbs in a vinegar, because the flavors become muddled and you can no longer detect the individual herbs.

We do not use distilled vinegar for making herb vinegars, since it is highly processed. We recommend using vinegars that come from natural food sources, like apple cider vinegar, white and red wine vinegars, balsamic vinegars from grapes, rice wine vinegar from rice, and ume vinegar (from umeboshi plums).

We choose organic apple cider vinegar or good quality white wine vinegar or rice vinegar to make our herb vinegars. To us, apple cider vinegar and umeboshi vinegars are tasty choices, but they are cloudy and do not give the clean, bright colors that some prefer from a clear vinegar. For the clearest vinegars, white wine vinegar and rice wine vinegar are good choices. The strong tastes of red wine and balsamic vinegars generally overpower the flavor of botanicals in a vinegar. Some people, however, prefer robust herbs such as oregano or rosemary combined with red wine vinegar. Experiment with whatever vinegars and herbs appeal to you.

Herb Vinegar

Makes 1 quart

For herb vinegar, harvest the fresh herbs of your choice on a sunny morning, rinse the sprigs if necessary, and pat dry. You will need one clean quart glass jar with a lid or two clean pint glass jars with lids. Use plastic lids; metal lids for vinegar solutions will corrode over time. Or before you screw the metal lids on, cover the mouth of the jars with plastic wrap.

2 to 3 cups fresh herb leaves and/or flowers, loosely packed
1 scant quart of your choice of vinegar

Fill one 1-quart jar or 2 pint jars half to three-quarters full with the herbs you have chosen. Pour the vinegar over the herbs to cover them. Cover the jars tightly and put in your pantry or a cool, dark place, and shake them daily, if you think of it.

After two to three weeks, open the jars and taste the vinegar. If you are happy with the flavor, strain the herbs from the vinegar and discard. Or, if you want a stronger flavor, re-cover and leave for another week or so. Pour the vinegar into attractive bottles, adding a fresh sprig of the herb if desired, and label. Store the vinegars in a cool, dark place and use within one year.

Aromatic Herbal Pastes

Many herbs freeze well when chopped and moistened with a little oil. This process is good for preserving savory herb pastes (such as pesto or salsa verde) for cooking and baking. We use this process most often with basil, since fresh basil tastes so different from dried. When dried, basil loses its bouquet—that wonderful aroma—and also loses flavor. We prefer the simplicity of freezing an herbal paste over preparing and freezing pesto, because the ingredients in pesto, like garlic, pine nuts, and Parmesan cheese, do not freeze well. For optimum flavor, add these other ingredients fresh when preparing the final dish. When making herbal pastes, you can add small amounts of other herbs like marjoram or oregano to make a blend of herbs, but we usually just use one herb, and then perhaps combine a few pastes when cooking.

Savory Herb Paste

Makes 1 to 2 cups, depending on herbs used

The yield for this recipe varies. Thin-leaved herbs like dill or thyme will process down to a much smaller amount than bulkier leaves like basil or mint. If you have washed the herbs for a paste, they must be completely dried before combining with oil (oil and water do not mix).

About 4 cups herb leaves, cleaned and patted or spun completely dry, stems removed
1/4 to 1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Coarsely chop the herb leaves in a food processor (or blender) by pulsing with about 2 tablespoons of the olive oil. Continue pulsing, adding just enough oil to coat the herbs and make a paste, but not so the herbs are floating in oil. There should still be some texture to the herbs and they should not be puréed.

Frozen herb-oil pastes are best stored in airtight, 1/2-cup to 1-cup freezer containers. Fill containers with the herb paste, leaving a 1-inch headspace for expansion during freezing. We also often use heavy-duty ziplock freezer bags: add 1/2 or 1 cup of the herb paste, flatten the bag to spread the contents evenly, remove the air, and zip closed. Be sure to label the freezer containers or bags with a permanent marker (they will all look similar when frozen). Place the containers in the freezer and stack. These herbs in oil will keep in the refrigerator up to one week and in the freezer until the next season's harvest.

When we need some of the herbal paste for a recipe, we take a container or bag from the freezer, and if we're not using the entire package, we use a spoon to scoop some from the container or break off a chunk from the bag, drop it into a soup or defrost it to make a sauce, then return the rest to the freezer.

Sweet Herb Paste

For making a sweet herbal paste, use the preceding Savory Herb Paste recipe with this difference: herbal pastes for sweet recipes vary from savory aromatic herbal pastes only in the herbs chosen and the kind of oil used. For baking, we make pastes of summer herbs, such as the

mints, lemon balm, lemon basil, and lemon verbena, to maintain their bright, fresh flavor. Rather than olive oil, choose from more neutral expeller or cold-pressed vegetable or nut or seed oils; we especially like sunflower seed oil. Or you can use softened butter, which will solidify when frozen, or a combination of half oil and half butter, which will not freeze as hard as just butter.

Herb Butters

Herb butters are easy to make and can be quite delicious. They can be used to add herbal flavor to vegetables, breads, sauces, egg dishes, and much more. Herb butters are usually made with savory herbs, but they can also be made with the sweeter herbs and used on pancakes, waffles, muffins, biscuits, and scones. Herb butters can be refrigerated, and they also freeze well and don't take up much room. Be sure to label the herb butters, since they all look alike when wrapped in the refrigerator or freezer.

When making herb butters, keep in mind that less is more. If using more than one herb, use one to three, maybe four, herbs for flavor. Too many herbs will make the taste muddled and dull. Use less of the stronger, perennial herbs like rosemary or oregano, and more of mild-flavored herbs like chervil or lemon basil. Herb flower petals add attractive dashes of color.

Some herbs that we like for savory herb butters are basil, calendula petals, chervil, chives and chive flowers, dill, fennel, marjoram, nasturtium flowers, oregano, parsley, rosemary, tarragon, and thyme. We often add a clove of minced or pressed garlic or about 1 tablespoon finely minced shallot to flavor savory herb butters. We also like to add a little lemon or lime zest.

For sweet herb butters, the lemon herbs like lemon balm, lemon basil, lemon verbena, and lemon thyme are quite lovely, beebalm and spearmint or orange mint work well. Colorful flower petals from calendula, lavender, or rose petals are appealing to the eye as well as the palate. Citrus zest also adds a tasty note.

Herb Butter

Makes 1/2 cup

For herb butter, harvest fresh herbs on a sunny morning, rinse the sprigs if necessary, and pat dry. You will need wax paper or plastic wrap to roll the herb butter logs, or you can use airtight freezer containers.

8 ounces (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
2 to 6 tablespoons minced fresh herbs and/or flower petals
1 tablespoon olive oil or other expeller or cold-pressed oil (optional)

Put the soft butter in a medium bowl. Add 2 to 6 tablespoons of the herbs, depending on what strength you want, and mix well with a spatula. If you want to make a butter that doesn't freeze quite so hard, add the olive oil.

On the work surface, place a square of wax paper or plastic wrap. Scoop out the herb butter mixture and put it in the center of the square. Form it into a log, wrapping tightly. Or pack the herb butter into 1/2-cup glass or ceramic containers and cover tightly with plastic wrap. Store in the refrigerator as is, or put the wrapped butter log or containers into a freezer ziplock bag for storing in the freezer. Be sure to label.

Herbal butters keep for up to two weeks in the refrigerator and six months in the freezer. To thaw frozen butters, put in the refrigerator for a few hours. The log-shaped butter can be sliced once it has hardened. Refrigerate the frozen herb butter for at least 1/2 hour before using, to allow the flavors to develop.