

How to preserve your CSA herbs

(so you never have to buy
herbs anywhere else)



Andree Anna Thorpe Photography

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Table 1: Quick Reference for CSA herbs	3
Two Best Methods for Preserving Herbs	4
How to prepare your herbs for preserving	4
Table 2: Categories for storage and prep.....	4
Mint, Oregano, Rosemary, Sage and Thyme	5
Cilantro, Dill and Parsley	6
Basil	7
Preserving Instructions	8
Method 1 - Air Drying.....	8
Method 2 – Freezing.....	9
Eight Advanced Methods and their benefits	10
1) Dehydrator	10
2) Oven	11
3) Ice Cube Herbs	11
4) Pesto	12
5) DIY vegetable stock	13
6) Herb Butter	13
7) Herb Vinegar.....	13
8) In a vase.....	14
Conclusion	15
Acknowledgements.....	15
Contact	16

Introduction

In this guide, I'll show ten ways to preserve your herbs. If you follow this guide, you'll rarely have to buy herbs outside your CSA share!

First, I'll share two easy ways to preserve herbs—all your CSA herbs—without special equipment or lengthy preparation.

I'll also share eight bonus methods that require a bit more attention, time and/or equipment and that can help you bring more versatility and flavour to your kitchen all year long.

The benefits of eating more herbs include:

- Herbs add rich flavours to your meals without over-using sugar, fat, or salt.
- Several herbs have high amounts of essential vitamins, contain antioxidants and anti-inflammatories or provide therapeutic benefits like soothing a sore throat and/or stomach.

Table 1: Quick Reference for CSA herbs

Method	Herbs	Photo	Reason
Air Dry	Mint	<i>Pg. 5</i>	Lower water content. Easy to air dry. Doesn't take up freezer space if dry.
	Oregano	<i>Pg. 15</i>	
	Rosemary	<i>Pg. 5</i>	
	Sage	<i>Pg. 13</i>	
	Thyme	<i>Pg. 1</i>	
Freeze	Basil	<i>Pg. 7 & 15</i>	Higher water content. More likely to rot or mold if air dried. Retains flavour well in freezer for up to a year.
	Cilantro	<i>Pg. 13</i>	
	Dill	<i>Pg. 6</i>	
	Parsley	<i>Pg. 9</i>	

Two Best Methods for Preserving Herbs

For the CSA, we grow nine different herbs that yield well on our farm and add delicious flavours to a wide variety of meals. Those nine are listed in Table 1: Quick Reference for CSA herbs on the previous page. This chart sorts the herbs by my recommended preserving method. It also tells you where in this guide to find a photo of each herb to help with identification.

How to prepare your herbs for preserving

In our CSA, most of the herbs are not delivered to you in a plastic bag, because some herbs can be damaged if stored that way. Some are washed, and others are not; for instance, basil is very sensitive to moisture and should only be washed just before use

So, what should you do with your herbs when you get them home? This section answers that question.

To get the most flavour, nutrition, and freshness from your herbs, first decide whether you want to use them in the week ahead or to save them for longer term storage.

For storage and preparation, I divide the herbs into three categories:

Table 2: Categories for storage and prep

Dry Herbs	Succulent / Hardy	Succulent / Tender
Mint, Oregano, Rosemary, Sage, Thyme	Cilantro, Dill, Parsley	Basil

Mint, Oregano, Rosemary, Sage and Thyme

Start to air dry these right away, they don't need to be put away in the fridge. It will only take a few minutes so just do it as you unpack!

If you are temporarily putting these in the fridge follow step 1. If you are air drying right away, skip to step 2.

- 1) Wrap herbs in towel and put in a bag or container in the fridge.
- 2) Discard any leaves that are yellow or brown. Leave the good green leaves on the stem.
- 3) Inspect the leaves and stems for soil or mud. If any part has been splashed with soil, try brushing it off the leaves with your fingers. If that is not adequate, rinse the leaves under water.
- 4) Remove excess water. Place in a strainer to drain the water or use a salad spinner to give them a quick spin. Next thoroughly pat the whole stem with a clean towel.
- 5) Next follow the instructions for air drying on page 8 and 9.



Rosemary



Peppermint

Cilantro, Dill and Parsley

With freezing, sooner is better for preserving the most nutrients and flavours.

If you are temporarily putting these in the fridge follow step 1 or 2. If you are freezing right away, skip to step 3.

- 1) Keeps for about 3-5 days in the fridge in a plastic bag. It is important to have the right balance between holding and releasing excess moisture. Drain excessive moisture from bag if needed. Leave bag loosely open and do not tie or seal bag.
- 2) To extend storage up to 7 days, put herbs in a hard-sided *vented* container on the day of CSA pick up. Buy a “produce saver” container or simply save, wash, and reuse a container from grocery store mixed greens. Line the container with a towel to absorb excess moisture. As you transfer the herbs, keep an eye out for any yellow leaves and discard them. Check the towel every couple of days, replace towel if saturated with water.
- 3) Before freezing, remove leaves from the stem and discard any leaves that are yellow or brown.
- 4) Place the good leaves in a large bowl of water and swish them around to wash. Drain and repeat if needed.
- 5) Once you are satisfied that leaves are clean, remove excess water. Place in a strainer to drain water away or give a quick spin in the salad spinner. Thoroughly pat leaves with a clean towel.
- 6) Follow freezing instructions on page 9 and 10.



Dill

Basil

In the short term, basil should be stored with stems in a vase of water at room temperature. Basil is very sensitive to temperatures below 10°C, so never put it the fridge. If you plan to freeze it, it's best to do so immediately.



Basil

If you are storing in a vase, follow steps 1 to 3. If freezing immediately, skip to step 4.

Cut the bottom ½ inch of stem off with sharp knife, taking care not to crush the stem.

- 1) Place stems in a glass of water. Keep where you can see it, such as on kitchen counter, table, or window sill.
- 2) Check on basil cuttings every day for wilting. Sometimes a stem or two may wilt despite water. In that case, use it immediately or discard.
- 3) Before freezing, remove leaves from the stem and discard any that are yellow or brown.
- 4) Place the good leaves in a large bowl of water and swish them around to wash. Drain and repeat if needed.
- 5) Place them in a strainer to drain the water away or give them a quick spin in your salad spinner. Pat the leaves with a clean towel.
- 6) Next follow the instructions for freezing on page 9 and 10.

Preserving Instructions

Now that you've prepared the herbs it's time to preserve them. You can refer to that handy reference chart on page 3 again as a quick reminder of what method to use for the nine herbs we grow at the farm.

Method 1 - Air Drying

This method is simple; few kitchen tasks are easier!

Steps:

- 1) Spread your *clean and dry* herbs on a plate or stand them in a glass or a jar. Make sure all leaves have good air flow and do not pack the stems too tight. Usually the herbs in your CSA share will fit on one 8" side plate, or in a pint size wide mouth mason jar, a tumbler glass, a large cup, or a coffee mug. (I prefer this to tying bunches of herbs; the leaves near a tie are always a bit too crowded.)
- 2) Stow the plate or jar of herbs in an out of the way spot where it won't get dusty and won't be exposed to direct sunlight. (I admit that I air dry herbs on my window sill because it's convenient and they look so beautiful, but don't usually use this method for herbs I intend to store for several months.) If space is an issue, consider buying a hanging herb dryer like in this photo from Lee Valley.



Or make a DIY version like this photo from fresheggdaily.com.

3) Within a week or two the herbs will be dry.

You can tell that they are dry when the leaves are brittle and crumbly to touch. If the leaves bend or stretch when



rubbed between your fingers, then they are not dry yet.

4) Once the herbs are dry, store in a closed jar in the cupboard. I use mason jars. To preserve the most flavour, keep the leaves whole and on the stem; or, for convenience, you can strip the leaves off the stem and crumble them up. Be sure to label with type of herb and the date.

5) Sometimes if it's humid the leaves will not dry to completely brittle, in that case don't seal them up in a jar. Instead, keep them close by while cooking and use them up sooner rather than later or finish drying them in a dehydrator or oven. Those methods are explained on page 9 and 10.

6) For maximum flavour, use your dried herbs within a year.

Method 2 – Freezing

The main benefit to freezing herbs is that it minimizes nutrient and flavour losses.

Steps:

- 1) Once the leaves are sorted, clean and dry, place whole leaves in plastic bags. Zip top bags are the most convenient type. Spread the leaves evenly in a thin layer and into the corners of the bag.
- 2) Seal the bag up most of the way. Leave a finger's width open.

- 3) Press the remaining air out of the bag before quickly zipping it up the whole way.
- 4) Put the labeled bag in the freezer; and you're done!

When you go use these herbs simply break off an appropriate amount for your recipe and if needed chop or mince to desired consistency on the cutting board.



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Eight Advanced Methods and their benefits

1) Dehydrator

If you grow your own herbs or are really serious about preserving, consider buying a dehydrator.

- it's fast
- it's space efficient
- it minimizes loss of nutrients and flavour compared to air drying

- it reduces the chance of partially dried herbs getting moldy or rotten
- succulent herbs like basil, cilantro, dill and parsley, won't air dry properly

We use a NESCO Snackmaster that we found on Kijiji for \$30 and it's worked extremely well for us for many years. We also use it for drying our sweet and hot peppers, fruit and even for organic beef jerky.

2) Oven

In a pinch, you can dry herbs in your oven on a baking sheet. To prepare the herbs, wash, sort and dry the herbs described above. Spread the leaves out thinly on baking sheet(s) and put them in the oven.

Technically, you should dehydrate herbs around 110 F to 120 F. However, most ovens only go down to 170 F. In that case, set temperature as low as possible and prop the door open an inch or two. It won't take long, so keep a close eye on it!

3) Ice Cube Herbs

With this method you mince the leaves, preferably with a food processor, and put them in ice cube trays.

I recommend this method for big batches. If you grow some of your own herbs, or if you have picked up extra bonus herbs at the CSA pick up, this approach can be faster and/or more space efficient than some other ways of preserving.



The main benefit to this approach is the modular product you get at the end. You just grab a

cube or two from the freezer whenever you are cooking your favourite recipes. No further chopping or prep required.

Mince the leaves in a food processor to desired consistency. Spoon the minced herbs into a dedicated ice cube tray for this purpose. Firmly press the herbs into the ice cube tray with the back of the spoon. Then use a tablespoon to add cold water just enough to cover the minced herbs. Find a level spot in your freezer to place the tray. Within 24 to 48 hours the herb cubes should be completely frozen. You can transfer the cubes to a freezer bag.

You may want a dedicated ice cube tray for this purpose as the tray will take on the flavours of the herbs over time. If you need to stack the trays in a cube freezer or small space, Ball makes an herb cube tray with a lid.

4) Pesto

If you are fan of eating pesto on pasta or pizza, in salads or on your salmon or chicken, you can look up a recipe and freeze it in small containers for later. This method is not viable unless you have a food processor, but if you do it is quite easy to make.



Marco Verch

Typically, pesto combines:

- 4 parts basil
- 1 part parmesan cheese
- 1 part olive oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ parts pine nuts
- fresh garlic, salt and pepper to taste

Variations: You can find recipes online for lots of different variations including pesto made with garlic scapes, cilantro, parsley, dill, spinach, mint, kale and arugula.

Note: some people prefer to add the parmesan after they take it out of the freezer.

5) DIY vegetable stock

Start collecting a bag or container in the freezer for clean vegetable trimmings, peels, and even surplus herbs for making veggie stock.

Method: In a stock pot, sauté a chopped onion, carrot, and celery in olive oil. Stir regularly for about 5 minutes on medium heat until softened. Add the vegetable trimmings and your surplus herbs from the freezer. Cover the mixture with water. Let the pot simmer, partially covered, for about 45 minutes. Allow the pot to cool before you pour the stock through a mesh strainer. Use stock to make soups, stews, risotto, rice, casseroles, and sauces.

6) Herb Butter

Once you make this butter you can store it in the fridge or freezer to add to steamed vegetables, toast or pasta.

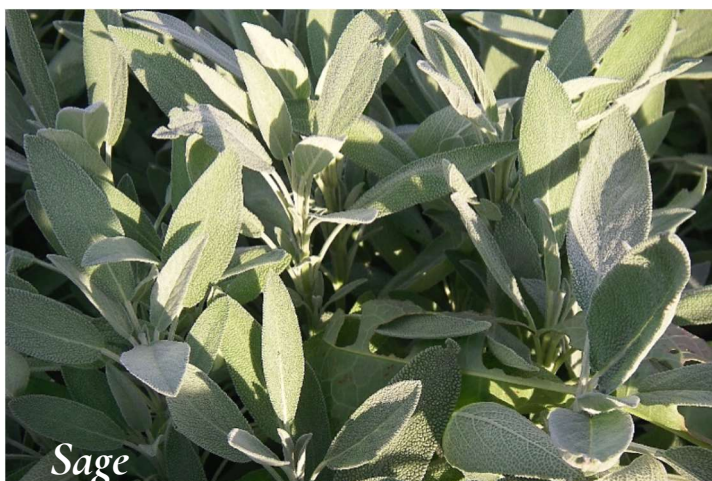
Method: Bring $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of butter to room temperature. Combine the butter in a bowl with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of finely minced herbs, garlic, salt and pepper to taste. Mix until everything is evenly distributed.

Place the mixture on a piece of waxed paper, shape it into a log, and twist the ends to seal. If you will use it within two weeks, keep it in the fridge.

If you want to store it longer, place in the freezer and slice off a disc anytime you wish to use it.

7) Herb Vinegar

With your CSA share, you'll probably be eating a lot of salad. Take a few minutes to make your own herb vinegar and you'll bring out the best in your homemade dressings and marinades. You can also use it



Sage



Cilantro

to garnish roasted veggies or grilled fish and in place of any vinegar in your favourite recipes.

Use delicate vinegars like white wine vinegar, apple cider vinegar, or rice wine vinegar. For herbs you can use any combination of either fresh, dried, or both. You'll need 2 parts vinegar for 1 part herbs. You can adjust this ratio depending on your preference and the potency
Method: Sterilize a clean jar by boiling it for 1 minute, or microwave for 1 minute on high. Jars with a plastic or cork lid or stopper are preferred to metal lids. If you only have metal lids, waxed paper will isolate the acid vinegar and prevent corrosion. It is also good to use plastic or wooden utensils when you are making your vinegar.

If you are using fresh herbs, sort, wash and pat them dry. Coarsely chop and pack the herbs into your jar and bruise the leaves with a wooden spoon.

If you are using dried herbs, put the whole stem into the jar and *avoid crumbling* the leaves to fine powder. If the leaves are too small you won't be able to strain them out later, resulting in cloudy vinegar. That's fine in practical terms but won't be as pretty.

Pour the vinegar into jar to cover the herbs. Put a lid on the jar. Label the jar (contents and date) and put it in the fridge. In 2 to 4 weeks, strain the herbs out of the vinegar. Clean and sterilize the jar thoroughly or use a fresh jar. Pour the vinegar back in to the jar, label it and put it back in the fridge.

You can start using it right away, and it will keep for 6 months to a year.

8) In a vase

I mentioned this method in the prep section as a temporary storage method for basil. However, it also works well for mint. If done carefully this method can be successful for storing basil and mint for several weeks or months. Then you can have fresh basil and mint, which is nice for certain recipes. The process is reviewed below.

When you get your basil or mint home, immediately cut the bottom



½ inch of the stems off with a sharp knife, taking care not to crush the stem. Next, place the stems in a glass of water.

Check on the stems the everyday and make sure they are not wilting. Sometimes a stem or two will not take to this storage method. In that case use it immediately or discard. Otherwise, pluck and enjoy leaves as desired starting with the lower leaves. Change the water a few times a week and top it up as need to keep all the stem ends submerged.

You may notice that some stems will start to sprout roots. If so, you may be able to keep those stems alive for several weeks or months in water or transplant them to soil in a pot.

Conclusion

Thanks for embracing local organic herbs! I hope this booklet inspires you to preserve more herbs so you can cook more flavourful and nutritious meals with your CSA herbs. If you have any questions or suggestions for a future update of this guide, please get in touch.

Acknowledgements

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