

Part Two: Growing Herbal Tea

By Lynn Heagney

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Harvest, then enjoy the fruits of your brewing

Your herbs are growing nicely. You've watered, trimmed and carefully monitored them for any insect or disease problems. Now you can begin harvesting. Choose a dry day, and pick the herbs in the morning after the dew has dried. The essential oil concentration is said to be the highest before the heat of the sun draws the oils out of the plant.

Depending on which herb you're harvesting, you'll use various parts: leaves, flowers, petals, hips, seeds, or roots. To harvest clean leaves, be sure to use scissors or shears rather than your fingers. You may want to rinse your herbs with a light spray; then let them dry in the sun or use a salad spinner to remove excess water. Avoid picking herbs that have been exposed to herbicides, insecticides, or car exhaust.

Drying or Freezing Your Herbs

To store your herbs, you can either dry or freeze them. Dry them quickly to ensure maximum flavor, using a gentle, even heat. One option is to use a food dehydrator. Place sprigs in a single layer on each tray; when dry, strip off the leaves and store in an airtight container. A microwave lined with paper towels can also be used. Set the timer for a minute or less, and keep a vigilant watch to prevent scorching or burning. Repeat until dry. Leave the door open a minute or two between each batch, allowing moisture to escape. You can also use a slow oven, from 100 to 125 degrees F. Keep the door slightly ajar; allowing moisture to escape. Check the progress often.

You can also hang your herbs in a dry place. To keep them dust-free, place bunches in paper bags with slits or holes. Never hang herbs in a garage or basement, since they tend to collect and absorb bad odors and molds. Whatever method you choose, keep your herb bunches separate and labeled. Once dried, they can be hard to tell apart.

Store dried herbs in airtight containers. If possible, store them whole to retain more scent and flavor. You can use glass jars or zip-lock bags. Paper bags will not protect herbs from dampness or pests. Containers should be clean, dry, and labeled with variety and date. Keep the containers away from moisture, sunlight and extreme heat.

You can also freeze herbs in zip-lock bags, preserving the delicate flavors lost in drying. When you're ready to use them, take out a few sprigs and mince with a sharp knife. Another option is to place petals, leaves, or sprigs in an ice cube tray, cover with water, and freeze. Once frozen, remove cubes from the tray, store in plastic bags, and use for iced teas and flavored punches.



Above: Herbs, dried whole to retain more aroma and flavor, should be stored in accurately labeled airtight containers, away from moisture, sunlight and extreme heat.
Right: Chop newly picked mint leaves to make tea, or dry them uncut and store in an airtight container for use during the winter. Another way to preserve herbs is to freeze them whole. **Photos by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald**



Infusion or Decoction?

Now that you've harvested and stored your herbs, you're ready to use them in your own teas. Remember, herbal teas brew differently from traditional teas; they take longer to brew and have little color. Allow ample time for brewing and make use of your sense of taste rather than sight. In season, fresh herbs are preferable; just use one sprig or tablespoon per person and bruise them by tearing or crushing to release the oils. If you're using dried herbs, use one teaspoon per person and one extra "for the pot."

You can brew your teas in two different ways, by infusion or decoction. Infusion gently releases the essential oils. This works best with fresh or dried herb leaves, petals, or flowers. Start by bringing cold water just to the boiling. Use a pan or teapot, preferably enameled; a metal pot may give the tea a metallic taste.

First rinse a ceramic or glass teapot with hot water. Add the tea directly to the pot, and strain before drinking. You may use an infuser: a metal or mesh ball, a bamboo strainer, muslin bag or empty tea bag. Pour boiling water over the tea herbs, steep for at least 5 to 15 minutes (15 is not unreasonable). When ready, fill a cup halfway with the infusion and top off with boiling water. If the brew seems bitter, try a little more herb with less brewing time.

Decoction is used mainly for seed, root, or hip teas, whose oils are more difficult to release. Crush the ingredients with a mortar and pestle, or use a spice grinder. Use one tablespoon for every two cups of water. Bring water to a boil in an enameled pan, add

ingredients, reduce the temperature, and allow the mixture to simmer for 5-10 minutes. Strain and serve.

Now that you've enjoyed the many rewards of growing your own herbal tea garden, you can now experiment with endless combinations. By growing your own herbs, you've also added a wonderful refuge in your yard for butterflies, birds, bees, and your friends and family. And when you're drinking one of your herbal teas one cold winter night, you can pat yourself on the back and think, "I grew it myself!"



Herbal teas take longer to brew, no matter whether you use fresh or dried herbs. The fresh herbs shown here, lavender and mint leaves, should be chopped to release the oils and steeped in boiling water for about 20 minutes. Lavender-mint tea tastes very similar to chamomile, but costs a lot less, Master Gardener Lynn Heagney says. **Photo by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald**

Sun Tea or Safe Tea?

Brewed tea is capable of supporting bacterial growth. Tea leaves can become contaminated with bacteria during the growing, harvesting, and drying process. Tea should be brewed with water hot enough to kill microorganisms. Making "sun tea" by steeping tea bags [or loose herbs] in containers of water warmed by the sun is a higher risk of bacterial growth, because the tea is brewed at low temperatures. Therefore brewing "sun tea" in the northwest is difficult because the days do not get warm enough to heat the water enough to kill the microorganisms. WSU Cooperative Extension recommends brewing tea with water at 175° F or hotter, then refrigerating it.

From "Brewing Safe Iced Tea" by Sandra Brown, WSU Clark County Extension

RESOURCES

- Brewing Safe Iced Tea by Sandra Brown, WSU Clark County Extension:
<http://clark.wsu.edu/family/specific-foods/BrewingSafeIcedTea.pdf>
- Herbal tea recipes, Straight From the Farm:
<http://straightfromthefarm.net/2008/11/22/herbal-tea-recipes/>
- 15 Herbs for Tea by Marian Sebastiano; Storey Publishing, North Adams, MA, 1998
- The Rodale Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs, by Claire Kowalchik and William Hylton; Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, 1998