

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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The abundant production of our gardens during the summer months makes this the perfect time to create gifts for year-round giving.

Wonderfully flavored oils and vinegars can be made from the bounty of the herb garden. They add interest to salads, sauces, stews, marinades and grilled and sautéed dishes. Two or more herbs can be combined and seeds, spices, garlic or lemon added depending on the flavor that you want to dominate.

Tarragon vinegar is one of my favorite vinegars. It is fragrant, versatile and easy to make by placing freshly cut sprigs into a decorator bottle and adding vinegar that is hot, but not boiling. You can use white, cider or wine vinegar. Use about three 2-inch sprigs of herbs for each cup of vinegar. Let the vinegar cool in the bottle, cover it, and store in a dark, cool place for up to one year.

Other combinations of herbs to use in flavored vinegar include sage, parsley, shallots and red wine vinegar; dill nasturtiums, garlic and cider vinegar; or savory, chive blossoms and cider vinegar.

A pretty bottle of raspberry vinegar is another delight that every cook loves to receive as a gift. Place 2 pints of berries and 1 quart of white vinegar in a large jar. Either mash the berries with a spoon, cover the jar and place it in a dark cool place or leave the berries whole, cover the jar and leave it in the sun. The heat will help break down the berries. Let the mixture rest for three weeks, strain it through a fine sieve into a sauce pan, boil it until reduced by about one-fourth and pour into sterilized decorator bottles.

Using flavored oils is a wonderful way to infuse a dish with subtle flavors. You can use olive oil, peanut oil or other vegetable oil. One of my favorite combinations is dried tomatoes, basil, thyme and garlic. Use two fresh herb sprigs, two peeled garlic cloves and two to three small dried tomato slices. Place them in a clean, sterilized decorator bottle and fill with hot, not boiling, oil. Seal the bottle, label it and place it on a shelf in a dark area for several months. Other delightful combinations include rosemary, garlic and thyme; or for a BBQ oil try garlic, chili, and rosemary. If you make it now, the oil will be ready to give as gifts by the time the holidays arrive.

Tomatoes can be made into sauces and soups that are frozen and reheated on stormy winter evening, dried and placed in jars filled with olive oil to be used in specialty recipes, or canned for use throughout the year.

Freezing is a good way to preserve onions, fennel and peppers. They can be chopped or sliced and then just the amount needed for the recipe is thawed. Beans are also good canned or frozen. Berries can be frozen whole or made into sauces and syrups for use on pancakes and ice cream.

There are many other lovely gifts from the garden including fragrant sachets and potpourri made from flower petals and buds; soaps and toiletries; and teas can be made from dried herbs.

For more information on canning fruits and vegetables and other ways to preserve your garden's bounty for year-round enjoyment, contact the Washington State University Skagit County Extension at 428-4270

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

CLARIFICATION OF INFUSED OIL AND VINEGAR

On Sunday, September 11, 2005, the WSU Master Gardener column discussed using your garden harvest to flavor oils and vinegars. Washington State University (WSU), Food Safety Advisors have clarified the use of garlic and fresh vegetables to flavor these liquids. Because of the potential risk of botulism, garlic or vegetables submerged in oil or vinegar should **never** be stored at room temperature. If tomatoes are to be used, they must be **thoroughly** dry. Oil mixtures may be refrigerated for up to three weeks, or stored in the freezer for longer periods. **Do not** seal your oils. It is not necessary. Vinegar mixtures may be refrigerated for about 4 months. For further information, call the WSU Extension office and ask for a WSU Food Safety Advisor.