

# Herbs: Fresh versus Dried

Fresh herbs are widely available, but the question remains, can dried herbs do the job of fresh? BY THE COOK'S ILLUSTRATED TEST KITCHEN

## Which Is More Potent?

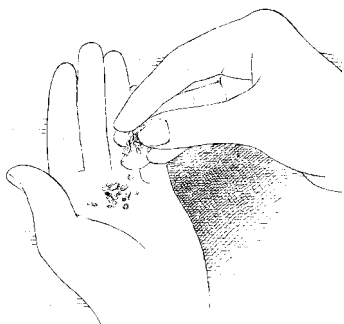
Depending on the variety, fresh herb leaves are 80 to 90 percent water. With drying, water is lost and, consequently, so are weight and volume. The volatile essential oils that give an herb its characteristic flavor and aroma are left closer to the surface, where they easily evaporate, leaving the herb without much flavor or aroma.

There is sometimes the misconception that dried herbs are less potent than fresh. However, because of the aforementioned water loss, the opposite is true. Ounce for ounce, dried herbs are more potent than fresh. Recommended substitution ratios range from 1 part dried to 2, 3, or even 4 parts fresh. Because the freshness of a dried herb has such a big impact on its potency, bear in mind that these recommendations are very rough guidelines at best. To complicate matters further, the fineness or coarseness of a dried herb can affect substitution amounts. For example, dried sage is available in three forms: ground, "rubbed" leaves that appear finely chopped, and coarsely crumbled leaves.

Our testing—in which we used only newly purchased jars of herbs—indicated that using 1 part dried herb to 2 parts fresh came closest to producing flavors of equal strength. However, if the herb is ground, as was the sage, 1 part dried ground to 3 parts fresh was a more suitable ratio.

## Judging Freshness in Dried Herbs

If you are questioning the age and freshness of an already-opened jar, crumble a small amount between your fingers and take a whiff. If it releases a lively aroma, it's good to use. If it doesn't, it's best to get a new jar. If the fragrance is present but relatively mild, consider using more than you normally would.



## Testing Fresh and Dried Herbs

Dried herbs are more convenient to use than fresh because they require no more prep than a twist of the lid. At *Cook's*, however, we use fresh herbs almost exclusively, without giving dried herbs much consideration. Could we be unduly biased, causing ourselves more prep than necessary, or simply overlooking some benefits of dried herbs? After all, dried herbs are a lot less expensive than fresh, and until recently they were more readily available. We decided to look into the matter more thoroughly. We purchased fresh and dried versions of basil, chives, dill, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage (in coarsely crumbled, rubbed, and ground forms), tarragon, and thyme. Then we cooked our way through 24 recipes (including marinades, sauces, and braises), making each with fresh and dried herbs and comparing differences in flavor. In all but one application, fresh herbs were preferred over dry. A common criticism of dried herbs was that they tasted "dusty" and "stale," while fresh herbs tasted "clean" and "bright." Many of the subtleties and nuances of fresh herbs seemed to be lost with drying.

That's the bad news. The good news is that there were a few instances in which some dried herbs were passable, mainly in recipes involving fairly long cooking times (20 minutes plus) and a good amount of moisture. Chili stood out as the one dish that was better when made with a dried herb (oregano) than with fresh. Dried rosemary, sage, and thyme also fared reasonably well in some applications. Those herbs that we unofficially classify as delicate (basil, chives, dill, parsley, and tarragon) seemed to have lost most of their flavor when dried; we preferred fresh forms of these herbs in every test.

### BASIL

There are many varieties of basil, but sweet basil is most commonly used in this country and is the type sold in dried form. The flavors of sweet basil contain hints of anise, mint, and clove.

Dried basil is sold in a flaky, chopped form, and it lacks the complex flavor of fresh. It elicited comments such as "stale" and "dead" when used to make stuffed tomatoes and a tomato sauce for pasta.

**DRIED:** Avoid using dried basil in any application.

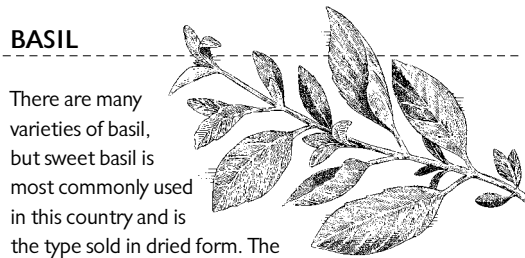
**FRESH:** Fresh leaves bruise and discolor easily; shred or chop fresh basil just before using. For freshest flavor, add near the end of cooking.

### CHIVES

Chives are appreciated for their mild allium flavor as well as for their emerald-green color and appearance when snipped. The delicate flavor of chives pairs well with seafood and eggs. Dried chives, however, look and taste dull, and they have a fibrous, papery texture. They performed especially poorly in a sour cream dip and in a vinaigrette.

**DRIED:** Avoid using dried chives in any application.

**FRESH:** Fresh chives cannot withstand cooking. For best flavor and appearance, add fresh chives just before serving.



### DILL

Remarkably, dried dill keeps some of the vibrant color of feathery fresh dill, but the similarities end there. The flavor is lost with drying, and what's left is a stale, dusty flavor and aroma. Dried dill was nearly tasteless in a smoked salmon dip as well as with buttered steamed new potatoes.

**DRIED:** Avoid using dried dill in any application.

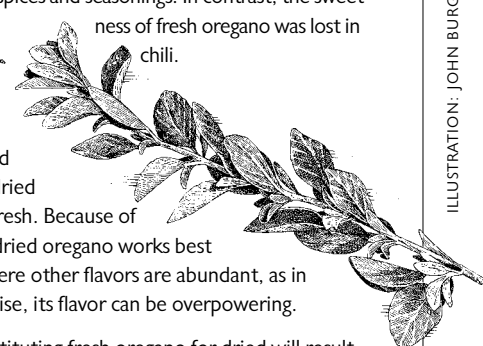
**FRESH:** Fresh dill cannot withstand cooking. For best flavor and appearance, add fresh dill at the end of cooking.

### OREGANO

Warm, earthy, robust oregano has a distinct flavor and fragrance. Used in place of fresh, dried oregano made a quick-cooked tomato pasta sauce taste like pizzeria sauce. However, dried oregano does have a place, particularly in chili, where its assertive flavor held its own in a mix of other spices and seasonings. In contrast, the sweetness of fresh oregano was lost in chili.

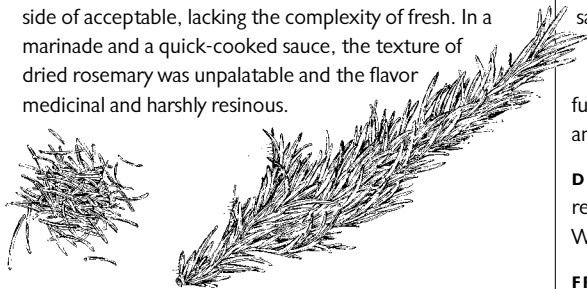
**DRIED:** Avoid substituting dried oregano for fresh. Because of its intensity, dried oregano works best in recipes where other flavors are abundant, as in chili. Otherwise, its flavor can be overpowering.

**FRESH:** Substituting fresh oregano for dried will result in a more subdued flavor.



## ROSEMARY

Rosemary has a warm, piney, honeyed flavor that is a particularly good match with lamb and beef. Long, slow braising gave the tough, brittle, pine-needlelike leaves of dried rosemary time to soften, but its muted flavor was just this side of acceptable, lacking the complexity of fresh. In a marinade and a quick-cooked sauce, the texture of dried rosemary was unpalatable and the flavor medicinal and harshly resinous.

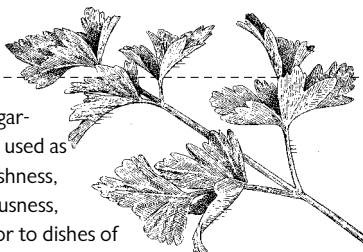


**DRIED:** Dried rosemary is OK for use in long-cooked soups and stews if fresh is not available. Avoid using dried rosemary in marinades and quick-cooked applications.

**FRESH:** The flavor of fresh rosemary mellows with long cooking; if a bright, pungent flavor is desired, add fresh rosemary near the end of cooking.

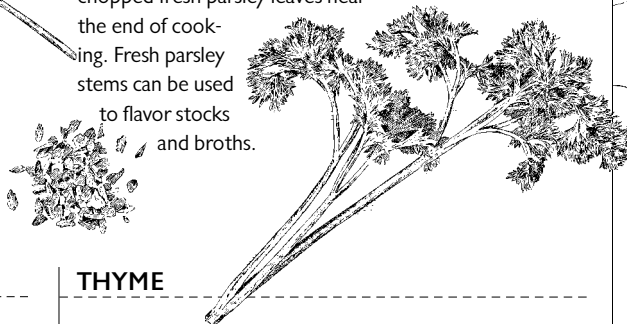
## PARSLEY

Parsley is used as a garnish as often as it is used as an herb, adding freshness, a generic herbaceousness, and, of course, color to dishes of all kinds. Both curly and flat-leaf (or Italian) parsley are widely available. In recipes where the flavor of parsley is an essential component, the stronger, grassier flavor of flat-leaf parsley is preferred. Dried parsley or parsley flakes have no flavor or freshness and a dull appearance.



**DRIED:** Avoid using dried parsley in any application.

**FRESH:** For the best flavor and appearance, add chopped fresh parsley leaves near the end of cooking. Fresh parsley stems can be used to flavor stocks and broths.



## TARRAGON

With a sweet licorice-like flavor and fragrance, tarragon is well suited to seafood, chicken, and eggs. Dried tarragon is sold in a flaky, chopped form; a licorice-like aroma may be present in dried tarragon, but most of the nuances and flavor of fresh are absent. In both a vinaigrette and a quick-cooked pan sauce, dried tarragon tasted dusty and stale.



**DRIED:** Dried tarragon lacks flavor and freshness. Avoid using it in any application.

**FRESH:** For freshest flavor and aroma, add fresh tarragon near the end of cooking.

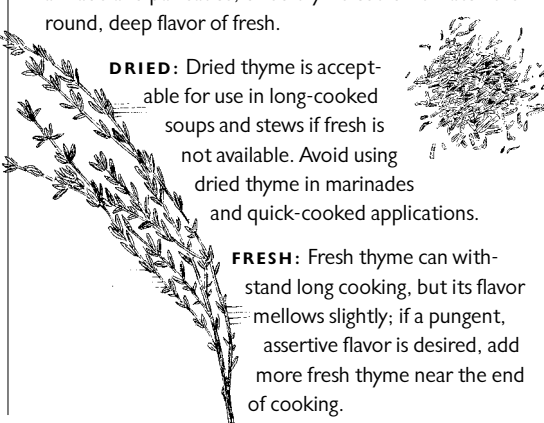


## THYME

The hearty, spicy, woody flavor and aroma of thyme is welcome in almost any dish, including soups, stews, and preparations with meats, poultry, and mushrooms. In a long, slow braise, dried thyme provided an underpinning of flavor, but it lacked the vibrant character of fresh. In a marinade and pan sauce, dried thyme couldn't match the round, deep flavor of fresh.

**DRIED:** Dried thyme is acceptable for use in long-cooked soups and stews if fresh is not available. Avoid using dried thyme in marinades and quick-cooked applications.

**FRESH:** Fresh thyme can withstand long cooking, but its flavor mellows slightly; if a pungent, assertive flavor is desired, add more fresh thyme near the end of cooking.



## SAGE

Earthy, musky sage is often matched with poultry and pork. It is available dried in three forms: ground, rubbed (finely chopped), and coarsely crumbled. In ground form, use one-third the amount of dried as you would fresh. Dried sage was acceptable in a combread and sausage stuffing where other flavors were plentiful. In a pan sauce, however, it failed to match the complexity and fullness of flavor of fresh and tasted stale and dull.

**DRIED:** Dried sage is acceptable for use in recipes where other seasonings are present. We had the best luck with the rubbed sage.

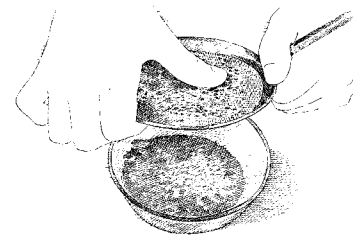
**FRESH:** Use fresh sage in any recipe where the flavor of sage is at the fore.



## Getting the Most from Dried Herbs

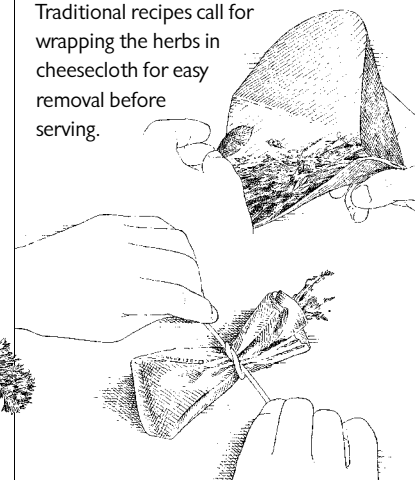
### Releasing Flavor

Flavorful oils in dried oregano, thyme, and other herbs should be released before the herbs are added to the food. Place the dried herbs in a mesh sieve and push down on them with your fingertips as you shake the sieve back and forth over a bowl.



### Making a Bouquet Garni

A bouquet garni is a classic French combination of herbs and black peppercorns used to flavor soups, stocks, and stews. Traditional recipes call for wrapping the herbs in cheesecloth for easy removal before serving.



A coffee filter can be used in place of the cheesecloth. Just place bay leaves, thyme, parsley (dried thyme is fine but use fresh parsley), and peppercorns into the filter. Tie the filter closed with kitchen twine.

### Storing Dried Herbs

We recommend replacement of dried herbs after about 12 months. So that herbs can be easily located when stored in a drawer and so that their ages can be tracked, write the name of the herb and the purchase date on an adhesive dot and place the dot on the lid. We do the same thing with spices.

