

# Using Herbs and Spices

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Although spices and herbs have been used since ancient times, they are playing a new and important role in modern food preparation. They not only add unique flavors to our food, but contribute color and variety as well. Certain spices and herbs used alone, or in blends, can replace or reduce salt and sugar in foods.

## What are spices and herbs?

Many people use the terms interchangeably to mean any product of plant origin used primarily for seasoning food. Technically, herbs come from aromatic plants grown in the temperate zone, while spices are products of tropical plants. Usually, the leaves of herbs are used; whereas, spices may come from the bark, berries, flower buds, roots, or seeds.

## Do herbs and spices add any nutritive value to foods?

Herbs and spices add very little if any nutritive value to foods – they are used only for flavoring or coloring foods. In general, they are low in calories, sodium, fat and have no cholesterol, although some of the oil-rich seeds, such as poppy and sesame, contain a moderate

amount of calories. Also, some seasonings, such as celery or parsley flakes, contain enough sodium to be counted. However, these ingredients are used in such small quantities that they are not a problem unless a recipe calls for an unusually large amount, or unless the diet restriction is severe.

## Using Herbs and Spices

The advice frequently offered today is simply, “In place of salt, use herbs and spices for flavor.” This leaves one wondering: Which spice with what food? How much? In what combination? Here are some starting points:

- Because herbs and spices are expensive, start with some of the basic herbs and spices. Americans particularly like pepper, basil, oregano and cinnamon.
- To become familiar with the flavor of a specific herb, mix it with butter, margarine, or cream cheese, let it stand for at least an hour, then taste this mixture on a cracker.
- Each spice or herb has a distinctive flavor, but certain spices and herbs can be grouped together.
- Strong or dominant flavor – Includes bay leaf, cardamom, curry (actually a blend of spices), ginger, pepper, mustard, rosemary, sage.
- Medium flavors – Use in moderate amounts (1 to 2 teaspoons for 6 servings). Includes basil, celery seeds and leaves, cumin, dill, fennel, French tarragon, garlic, marjoram, mint, oregano, savory, thyme, turmeric.

- Delicate flavors – Includes burnet, chervil, chives, parsley. May be used in large quantities and combined with most other herbs and spices.
- Sweet flavor (combined in sweet dishes may let you reduce sugar) – Includes cinnamon, cloves, allspice, ginger, cardamom, anise, fennel, mint.
- Savory flavor – Oregano, tarragon, chives, dill.
- Peppery flavor – Red pepper, mustard, black pepper, paprika. Use with care since their flavors stand out (approximately 1 teaspoon for 6 servings).
- Consider the flavor of the main ingredient in the recipe. In general, the weaker the flavor of the food, the less seasoning needed to give a satisfactory balanced note in the final product.
- Consider the form that will be used. Dried herbs are stronger than fresh herbs because the chemicals that produce the characteristic flavor are more concentrated. Powdered spices are stronger than crumbled spices since the flavoring chemicals can mix with the food easier. A useful guide is: 1/4 teaspoon powdered = 3/4 to 1 teaspoon dried crumbled = 2 to 3 teaspoons fresh.
- When using fresh herbs, chop the leaves very fine. The more cut surface exposed, the more flavor will be released. Kitchen shears are ideal for cutting fresh herbs, but a knife can also be used.
- Use whole spices in recipes that require lengthy cooking because there is plenty of time for the flavor to be extracted and spread throughout the food. The flavor of herbs is lost however, by extended cooking, so add them during the last 45 minutes if the recipe calls for long simmering. Another technique is to use part of the herb at the beginning and the remainder later in cooking.
- In quick- or medium-cooking dishes, crush dried herbs first to release some of the oils. Use a mortar and pestle or a rolling pin.
- Add herbs several hours or overnight to cold foods such as dips, cheese, vegetables and dressings. This allows the flavors to blend.
- Be conservative in the amount of an herb used until you are familiar with the strength of it. Start with a pinch. You can always add more, but you can't remove it. The flavor can be extremely objectionable if too much is used.
- To test herb or spice combinations in soups or stews, remove 1/2 cup of food from the pan. Add a large pinch (1/8 teaspoon) of each and stir. Allow to stand at room temperature approximately 10 minutes. Taste. If acceptable, add the combination to the remainder of the recipe.
- For salt reduction, choose the savory or biting spices and herbs, blends and vegetable seasonings. Good choices include black pepper, garlic powder or granules, curry powder, cumin, dill seeds, basil, ginger, coriander, onion, tarragon and oregano.
- When reducing sugar, use the sweet spices. They are appealing in sweet dishes, and the amount of sugar may be reduced because they give the impression of greater sweetness.
- When using more than one herb or spice, do not mix two very strong flavored herbs together. Rather, combine one strong flavored with one or more milder flavored herbs to complement both the stronger herb and the food.

## Storing Herbs and Spices

Keep herbs and spices in a cool, dry place (not over the range!) and in air-tight containers. Store dried herbs in plastic bags, glass jars or stainless steel containers rather than in cardboard. Keep containers

out of direct sunlight, which fades the color of the herb and reduces its strength.

Your recipes won't taste as good if the spice or herb has lost its flavor. Simply adding more than the recipe calls for won't solve the problem. Check whole spices for freshness once a year by crushing a small amount and sniffing it. The aroma should be fresh and pungent. Use the same method to check ground spices every six months and dried herbs 2 to 3 times a year.

Because spices and herbs are expensive, refrigerating or freezing in air-tight containers lengthens their life. The flavor and color will last longer, and refrigeration will reduce the chance of insect infestation. Some spices such as paprika, chili powder and red pepper attract insects.

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