



Many options for storing fresh herbs

We are growing fresh basil and other herbs. What is the best way to store them for use later?

That depends on what you mean by “later.” Drying herbs is a good idea for long-term storage. But if you mean “later today” or “later in the week,” then you have some options.

One thing experts seem to agree upon is this: Don’t wash herbs before short-term storage. That introduces too much moisture. And besides, the leaves are delicate, and you don’t want to handle them more than necessary. Beyond that, though, it seems like every authority has different guidance — try a few to see what works best for you:

- In the classic “On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen,” author Harold McGee notes that cutting an herb’s stem will likely cause the production of the gas ethylene (a plant’s wound hormone). If allowed to build up in a closed container, ethylene will cause the herb to deteriorate much more quickly than if the gas can escape. So, McGee suggests storing fresh herbs in partially open plastic bags, loosely wrapped in a paper towel or cloth to absorb moisture. Basil is a bit different. Because it originates from a warm climate, McGee believes it does better at room temperature. He suggests placing the cut stems in water, like a bouquet of flowers, and leaving on the counter.

- Another trusted authority is

Sharon Tyler Herbst, author of “The Food Lovers Companion.” Herbst recommends wrapping basil leaves or other herbs in barely damp paper towels, placing them in a sealed plastic bag and storing in the refrigerator. Or, put the stems in a glass of water, place a plastic bag over the leaves (securing with a rubber band), and keep refrigerated for up to a week, changing the water every two days.

- The National Gardening Association’s Web site, <http://www.garden.org>, offers advice specifically about basil. It suggests storing basil in a perforated plastic bag at room temperature, or keeping stems in water on the counter. In addition, it cites a Michigan State University study that indicates basil keeps longest if picked late in the day. That challenges standard advice to harvest herbs early in the morning, after the dew has evaporated but before sun warms the plants, when fragrance oils are at their peak.

For guidance on longer-term storage, Colorado State University Extension offers a fact sheet on “Growing, Preserving and Using Herbs” at <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/Pubs/foodnut/09335.html>. The Web page gives guidance on more than a dozen types of home-grown herbs, including both freezing or drying for long-term storage.

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