

Shelf Life & Storage of Herbs

Herbs do not "go bad", they lose potency. Heat, light, and moisture damage the dried botanicals. Proper storage for medicinal and culinary herbs requires glass containers, well-sealed, away from moisture, heat and light. Do not store herbs or spices in plastic, vinyl bags, aluminum or tin containers. Avoid keeping herbs near the stove, in the refrigerator or in the bathroom.

With proper storage, you can expect the following shelf life, from date of purchase:

Whole: 2 ½ years

Cut: 2 ½ years

Powder: 2 years

Store herbs in a cool, dry, dark place (away from sunlight). Dried herbs keep for years but for best results use within a year. Most herbs will diminish in flavor with age and a larger amount will be needed to achieve the desired flavor in cooking.

Sage is the only herb that will grow stronger in flavor during storage. For making rubbed sage, place dried leaves in a wire strainer or sieve over a plate and rub against the side. Sage is a strong herb and rubbing creates smaller pieces for more even distribution in recipes.

In order to preserve an investment in herbs and plant materials, it is important to be aware of a few things. Most obviously, plant materials were once living things filled with water and home to a variety of insects and fuzzy things. Also important is that the dried matter breathes constantly, and if you allow it to breathe unpleasant odors or scents, the materials may take on some of these characteristics themselves.

Glass airtight containers are best for long term storage of herbs. Metal lids equipped with some sort of plastic or rubber seal will further assist at keeping moisture out of the jars, as well as help inhibit the growth of molds and such. Of course, if you can afford to vacuum seal herbs in foil/metallic bags, they will last indefinitely assuming that they were properly dried and sealed in the first place.

Darker jars will help keep the light from degrading the color and quality of the herbs; though these are rare in any substantial size. A dark bookshelf or pantry is a good substitute.

Unfortunately, mold and mildew prosper in the dark, so be sure to check in on your stock from time to time. Even a well-treated supply could succumb to mold and mildew. If this does happen, take care in disposing of the materials. You don't want to breathe the spores of the mold if at all possible; and you don't want to try to sort the rotten part from what appears to be still good. It's just an appearance; once mold makes its way into a bundle of herbs, it's impossible to see the other minute particles and spores that could be lurking.

If you must store things in plastic, zip lock baggies work better than baggies with twist ties, for the obvious reason that less air will enter the bag. Keep aware though that the plastic will work its way into the herbs in time, ruining the scent.

Moisture is a detriment to the dried plant, as it will hasten the process of decomposition. Allow too much moisture into the jars and the next time you open them, you may find yourself with compost.