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Harvesting organically grown herbs

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Throughout history, the harvesting of edible and medicinal herbs has been traditionally associated with celebratory festivals and various types of religious and spiritual practice. Since medieval times, convents and monasteries in Western and Eastern Europe were important repositories of knowledge regarding the prescription and application of herbal remedies. Various herbs were esteemed and respected for their abilities to influence physical, emotional, and spiritual states. Several were used as devotional tools and provided evidence for the manifestation of almighty creation. In this context, harvesting of medicinal herbs was dependent upon observing the appropriate customs and ritual. These specified the important parts of each plant, the quantities to be gathered, appropriate times of day, and the correct methods for handling and storing each species. Such skills were mastered slowly, under supervision of experienced elders.

In separate and far removed corners of the world, herbs were valued for similar reasons. Traditional Polynesian cultures, for example, protected culturally significant herbs by establishing a tapu or prohibition during certain times of the year. This restricted the overall quantity harvested and assisted the natural renewal of supply.

To achieve commercial success, organic herb growers depend upon their ability to coordinate and execute an efficient and productive harvest. This often requires harvesting in large quantities to fill orders on a contractual or independent basis. Organically certified herbs are in demand throughout the year for the restaurant, catering, and fresh produce industries. Manufacturers of processed foods may prefer to use organic herbs in their premium quality products. Large quantities of organically certified herbs are also needed for essential oils, cosmetics, therapeutic products, and standardised herbal supplements.

Determining an appropriate time for harvesting herbs is a skill which can be developed through the combination of research and practical experience relating to both local growing conditions and each

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individual species under cultivation. When the growth habits of an individual herb species are documented for a particular region, it becomes much easier to plan a harvesting schedule. The best of these will establish seasonally dependent goals yet be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the uncertainty of shifting weather conditions, fluctuating markets, and limited resource availability.

Annual herbs like chervil, basil, and dill can be harvested lightly during early months of the growing season, then more vigorously towards its conclusion. The recommendation for early harvesting is to avoid removing more than ten percent growth in a single picking. Some well established herbs require additional harvesting sessions to enable portions of the plant to be separately processed. Leaves, flowers, fruit, and seeds can be gathered according to seasonal availability and market demand. To obtain maximum flavour and oil content, leafy herbs should be picked before flowering, from the head and upper stems of the plant. Providing the leaves are quite dry, early morning and late evening are the best times of day for harvesting. Each of these practices helps to extend the useful life of the plant although a complete and final harvest may be required on account of inclement weather, particularly the threatened arrival of early frost.

Depending on the physical characteristics and general health of each crop, stems can be chopped just above ground level to increase the quantity of harvested material. When cultivated organically, large scale plantings of perennial herbs require a substantial investment in time and resources. To make the undertaking worthwhile, crops are usually harvested several times each year, although it is preferable to harvest sparingly and only once during the initial year of established growth. Excessive pruning will weaken the most resilient perennial herbs like thyme and rosemary. This is particularly so in colder weather when many plants are less vigorous. Careful harvesting in warm conditions, followed by an adequate recovery rarely compromises healthy perennials; it usually encourages vigorous renewal of leaf growth within several weeks.

Most organic herb growers harvest small quantities of their plants for everyday use. Under these conditions, it is important to nurture the integrated functionality of the organic garden. Since many herbs attract valuable pollinators into the garden, it is a good idea to encourage extensive growth and flowering, particularly on plants nearest the border of a woodland. Those acting as companion plants for other species, must be kept in premium condition and only harvested as a last resort. For ornamental and decorative gardens, it makes sense to harvest plants by pruning them into the desired forms. When this results in material additional to requirements, it can be composted or dried and stored for future use. Only harvest in fine weather once the morning dew has evaporated and the foliage is dry. Remove one stem at a time using a sharp pair of secateurs and a decisive action. To encourage fast recovery, cuts should be made directly above a set of leaf nodes. Blunt tools must be avoided since these are likely to crush sensitive plant tissue and create opportunities for bacterial or fungal disease. Once harvested, herbs should be handled sparingly and used as quickly as possible to ensure maximum flavour or therapeutic potency.

The demand for seeds, flowers and rhizomes, has encouraged many organic herb growers to specialise in one or more of these products. The recommended method of seed removal varies across individual species. Those with very fine seed such as parsley and coriander tend to scatter widely unless the head is contained. Some growers tie paper bags over their seed heads and carefully shake them loose. Another method involves manually agitating the heads with a fine sable brush and gathering the dropped seed onto a large sheet of dark paper. Plants with large seeds may require individual picking by hand.

Most herbal flowers are picked for their perfumed oils, although some will be processed as dry products which are suitable for a range of applications. Since oil extraction is facilitated through a combination of crushing and distillation, there is less emphasis on the size, shape or colour of individual flowers. Most of these are harvested slightly immature, before reaching their full bloom. When dried for decorative purposes, individual flowers are usually harvested with their stalks and all of the petals intact. After picking, these need to be manoeuvred carefully by their stems and rested on a firm flat surface where they are graded, pressed, then naturally or artificially dried.

Rhizomes such as ginger, Korean ginseng and turmeric are collected around the beginning of autumn once the leaves begin to change colour. In compact soils they are difficult to remove by hand without snapping and breaking them apart. A small hand fork is suitable for gently releasing



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each rhizome. After gently removing any loose soil with a brush, these delicacies can be eaten fresh, dried, or stored carefully as propagation material for the forthcoming season.

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