KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good At It

“Harvesting Your Herbs”

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One of the first rules to learn about growing herbs is to harvest them early in the morning. The best picking time is just after the morning dew has dried, but before the sun has had a chance to dry the herbs. The reason is that the essential oils that give herbs their flavor and fragrance lose their quality when exposed to heat. If you plan to use the herbs right away for cooking you can pick them anytime.

The intended use of the herbs, maturity of the plant and our climate all influence the time of harvest. With regards to harvest dates, Central Oregon is considered a colder climate and we have fewer chances to harvest. Actually, we’re happy just to get the herbs up and growing before the frost returns.

Perennials:

Perennials herbs, like lavender, should not be heavily harvested the first year of growth to allow them to get established and encourage root growth. Then, in our cooler climate, you can take up to a third of the growth in early fall prior to predicted frost. Remember, plenty of foliage and lots of full sun will allow perennial herbs to manufacture and store adequate food for the winter.

Annuals:

Since annuals are limited to one season of growth, our only concern in Central Oregon is to harvest as much as you can before the killing fall frost. The same is true for biennials like parsley. When harvesting throughout the season, a good general rule is to harvest no more than the top half of the plant at one cutting.

How to harvest:

I use a pair of sharp scissors or you can use a garden knife when harvesting your herbs. If you’re collecting leaves, cut the whole stem before stripping away the foliage. With small leaved perennials, like rosemary and thyme, save only the leaves and discard the stems, or you could use them in potpourris.

When harvesting herbs that spread from a central growing point, like parsley, harvest the outer stems or leaves first. If you’re collecting leaves or flowers from bushy plants, do so from the top of the plant; new growth will come from below.

Of course, you can harvest foliage and flowers from both perennials and annuals continuously, if you’re just snipping a few leaves and blooms to collect for your favorite recipe.

Herbs retain their best qualities if they’re left unwashed until it’s time to use them. Some gardeners advise sprinkling the plants the day before harvest to wash away the dust. You could also swish them through cold water and pat them dry or simply hang them in the shade to drip dry.

If you plan to dry your herbs, bunching them as you collect them saves time later. I like to gather enough herb stems to make a 1-inch thick bundle and then wrap a rubber band over the cut ends. If you’re lucky enough to have some annuals left in the fall, simply pull and hang the whole plant, after first cutting away the roots and soil.

If you plan to grow herbs for their seeds, you should harvest after the seeds have turned from green to brown but before they begin to fall to the ground.

For the best flavor in your cooking and baking, I simply walk to my garden and harvest the herbal leaves or the buds just before they open to enjoy the greatest concentration of oils.

If you are harvesting for crafts the herbs should be cut when they’re flowering. Yarrow grows well in Central Oregon and is often used in dried arrangements. It should be collected in full bloom or just before with a long stem. Rose petals are also collected at full bloom after the morning dew has dried.

Herbs are so versatile and a variety of products can be made from your own garden. You can make potpourris, perfumed oils and soaps, create arrangements or simply enjoy them as a bright and fragrant border in your garden.

There are lots of books of the subject of growing herbs which include design, function and preparation of your garden and I’ve included a few in my resource list below.

Resources:

Rodale’s Successful Organic Gardening: Herbs – Patricia S. Michalak

The Complete Book of Herbs: A practical guide to growing and using herbs – Lesley Bremness

Herbal Teas for Health and Healing – Jessica Houdret