

Prolong the Joys of Summer with Herbs from the Garden

by Martina Goscha

The lazy, hazy days of summer may be gone and with them the growing season for many fruits and herbs will close. There are ways, however, to prolong the joys of summer. The fruits of our labor in the herb garden may be enjoyed all year long. Remember how delicious that fresh basil tasted? Dice some leaves and put them into ice cube trays. Fill with olive oil and freeze. Once frozen, transfer them to freezer bags. Pop them out one at a time and add to flavor delicious soups and stews. Remember they are concentrated.

Any hostess would love to have a bottle of fresh, homemade vinegar. Here is a popular recipe:

Herb Vinegar

Sterilize glass containers and lids according to the manufacturer's recommendation. Gather herbs after the dew has dried. Prepare three or four sprigs of herbs per pint of vinegar by washing the best leaves thoroughly, blotting them dry with paper towels and then dipping them in a solution of 1 teaspoon household chlorine bleach and 6 cups of water. Rinse thoroughly and pat dry. Almost any vinegar can be used but the vinegars carry their own flavors so a little prior experimentation would be advised to get the right blend of flavors. Place the prepared herbs in the sterilized containers and cover with vinegar that has been heated to just below boiling. Leave about ¼ inch of headspace in the jar. Clean the rim with a damp cloth, attach the lids and let sit until cool. Keep in a dark place for three to four weeks. Remove the herbs and strain through cheesecloth several times until clear. Rebottle in sterilized jars, add a label and give for a wonderful hostess gift or enjoy some yourself. These flavored vinegars may last as long as three months if properly prepared and maintained.

Here is another good recipe:

Mint Jelly

1 cup washed and chopped mint leaves
1 cup water
1/2 cup vinegar
3 1/2 cups sugar
5 drops green food coloring
1 pouch liquid pectin

Combine first 4 ingredients in a large kettle. Place over high heat and cook stirring constantly until mixture comes to a full rolling boil. Stir in pectin and food coloring. Continue cooking until mixture reaches a hard boil that can't be stirred down. Remove from heat. Skim off any foam from surface and ladle into hot, sterilized half-pint canning jars. Wipe rims and install two-piece canning lids. Process in a Boiling Water Canner according to the manufacturer's directions. Label jars after they cool.

Herb jellies may be used for tea sandwiches or serve on top of a block of cream cheese with crackers for an appetizer. This jelly is also very good with pork.

These are just a couple of the ways to use these wonderful plants. There are many more. Contact your local Cooperative Extension Office for more ideas and complete processing instructions.