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Living Well

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Add a Little Spice (& Herbs) to Your Life!

Herbs and spices have been used in foods for centuries. Today, consumers often use herbs and spices to enhance the flavor and healthfulness of foods. While spices from all over the world are widely available, herbs can be grown in your garden or purchased from the grocery store. Some of the commonly asked questions regarding herbs and spices are answered below.

What is the difference between an herb and a spice? Herbs are leaves of low-growing shrubs that can be used either fresh or dried to season food. Examples include parsley, chives, thyme, basil, oregano, rosemary, and sage. Spices, on the other hand, come from the bark (cinnamon), root (garlic), buds (cloves), seeds (poppy seeds), berry (black pepper), or the fruit (paprika) of tropical plants and trees.

How should I store herbs and spices? The flavors herbs and spices can be destroyed by heat, light, and moisture. Remember to store herbs and spices in tightly covered containers in a cupboard or drawer. Also, store them away from heat and moisture sources such as the dishwasher, sink, range, or heating vent. You also keep moisture out of the herb or spice container by placing the measured amount in a small bowl when preparing foods instead of measuring or sprinkling over a steaming pot.

How can I use herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor food? Flavors such as black pepper, garlic powder, cumin, basil, ginger, and onion are the effective in replacing the taste of salt. Be sure to check the ingredient label of seasoning mixes to ensure that salt is not the first ingredient. You can also reduce sodium by buying powdered garlic or onion instead of garlic salt or onion salt.

Do herbs and spices have a shelf life? Most people keep seasoning too long for best quality. Generally, keep herbs and ground spices about a year and whole spices about two years. Write the date on the seasoning container when you bring it home from the store.

How can I preserve fresh herbs? Fresh herbs are easy to preserve for future flavor. For short-term use, within a week, store in a glass with a small amount of water in the refrigerator. Cover loosely with a plastic bag. You can also freeze herbs by sprinkling them loosely on a cookie sheet. Once they are frozen, repackage them in an airtight rigid container to store in the freezer. Frozen herbs will be limp and should be used in cooked dishes.

Can herbs be dried? Yes, herbs can be dried in the oven or a dehydrator. Spread a thin layer on a cookie sheet and heat in a warm oven up to 180 degrees. Leave the door partly open and stir frequently. Remove when thoroughly dry and package in airtight containers.

For more information on cooking with herbs and spices, contact the Flint Hills Extension District office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491 or the office in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136.