

CREATE YOUR OWN HERBAL VINEGARS

Flavored vinegars are an excellent way to utilize herbs and flowers from your garden/farm. The finished product is inexpensive, easy to make, and preserves the flavors of summer in a manner that stores well through the long winter months. The myriad of flavors that can be obtained will become welcome additions to your favorite recipes. In addition, these vinegars are an attractive way to share your field's bounty with others. Herbal vinegars are healthy alternatives for recipes, adding flavor without adding salt, fat, or significant calories.

VINEGAR TYPES: The first challenge is choosing a vinegar type from the wide variety available. Those most suitable as foundations for flavored vinegars should be of a quality that is pleasing to the taste before flavoring, and not so strong as to overpower the delicate contributions of the herbs and spices.

Champagne vinegar: Made from dry white wine and excellent for flavoring with milder herbs, fruit, and flowers.

Cider vinegar: Widely available and made from apple cider aged at least 6 months in wooden barrels. It is best used with medium or strong flavored herbs and spices.

Malt vinegar: Barley and grain mash is heated and fermented similar to beer and combined with wood shavings to mature. Usually colored with caramel, its hearty taste is best utilized in pickles, relish, catsup and mustard.

Rice vinegar: Usually made from rice wine. Because of its mild sweet taste, it is well suited for flavoring with delicate herbs and flowers.

Wine vinegars: Made from white, red, and rose wines. The white wines are best for use with the lighter herbs and seasoning, and the red wines are suitable for use with the more robust flavors.

Distilled vinegar: Perhaps the most widely available type of vinegar generally made from fermented grain or wood pulp and diluted to 5% acidity. Although colorless, it has a harsh flavor and is best suited to cleaning or other household chores. It is used in commercial pickling, but it is not a suitable base for herbal flavoring.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATION: Most herbs will grow best in full sun and do not require high soil fertility to produce a flavorful crop. If fertilizers are applied, utilize balanced amounts of the major nutrients nitrogen/phosphorus/potassium. The most important aspect of herb cultivation is good drainage. This will improve the winter survival of permanent plantings by minimizing root damage.

HERBS TO GROW: Creating the materials to flavor your choice of vinegar begins in the field. Many herbs are easy-to-grow annuals, which can be direct-seeded when the danger of frost is past. The annual varieties most popular for flavorings include:

- Basil, Cilantro, Dill, Fennel, Sweet Marjoram, and Savory.

Perennial herbs are generally much slower growing the first year and are best started by transplants. The varieties most suitable include:

- Mint, Chives, Rosemary, Sage, Tarragon, and Thyme.

Other garden favorites include:

- Parsley and Hot Peppers, which can be started from transplants.
- Garlic and Shallots, which are established from cloves or sections of the original bulb.

Flowers that are also utilized for flavoring the milder vinegars include:

- Borage, Nasturtiums, and Chive blossoms.

Harvesting; Considerations for harvesting vary with the intended use of the plant materials:

- For drying, whole herb plants can be cut just before flowering for highest flavor and yield.
- Fresh leaves can be picked at any time the plants have enough foliage that their growth is not impaired.
- Flower parts need to be closely monitored for picking just as they begin to open.
- Dry seed heads will need to be gathered before they begin to shatter. These and drying herbs are best hung in a well-ventilated room away from direct sunlight to avoid loss of color and flavor.

Utensils:

- Equipment required for combining the fresh or dried herb materials with the vinegar base is not elaborate. Wide mouth containers with lids suitable for steeping each combination of ingredients from 1 week to 1 month are required. These can be glass, porcelain, or enamel-coated steel. If using jars with metal lids, plastic wrap or wax paper is required to isolate the lids from the vinegar to prevent rust. Stainless steel pots can also be used to heat or store the vinegars, but aluminum, cast iron, or uncoated steel should not be used.
- A second selection of bottles or jars will be required for storing the finished product. These need to be glass, ceramic, plastic or cork top to tightly seal the contents. Wax can be utilized to seal if desired.
- A bottle brush to clean your new or recycled bottles is a good investment.
- Funnels are required, as well as a selection of cheesecloth, coffee filters, or muslin to strain the sediment when steeping is finished.
- Many people decorate the finished bottles with ribbons, tags, or artistic labels.

Steeping:

Not using enough herbs is the biggest mistake most people make when flavoring vinegars. A good rule of thumb for most recipes is 1 cup of fresh herb leaves or ½ cup of dried leaves for every 2 cups of vinegar used. Gather fresh material when the dew has dried. Wash if necessary to remove dirt and insects, and dry carefully on screens or with paper towels.

The herb materials should be placed in a sterile jar(s) and a wooden spoon can be used as to not bruise the leaves before the jar is filled with the chosen vinegar. Tightly cap the jar and allow it to steep in a dark place at room temperature for a week. The jars can be shaken occasionally during this time. If the flavor is not strong enough after one week, wait another week and taste again. Should it be necessary, the steeping process can be repeated again with fresh herbs to increase the flavor even more.

Bottling:

When the flavoring is to your taste, use a funnel and a triple layer of cheesecloth, muslin, or a coffee filter to strain the vinegar into the sterilized finishing bottles. These can be capped tightly or sealed with a cork and wax, and will keep up to a year in a cool, dark place. A fresh sample of the flavoring materials can be placed in the finished bottle for decoration prior to filling.

Checklist for Success

1. Clean all bottles and equipment thoroughly—use non-reactive materials such as glass, porcelain, stainless, or enamel-coated metal.
2. Choose vinegar types that best compliment flavoring ingredients.
3. Use enough flavoring materials: 1 cup fresh or ½ cup dried herbs per 2 cups vinegar.
4. Steep materials at room temperature in covered jars, shaking occasionally until flavor develops—1 to 4 weeks.
5. Filter vinegar to remove sediment, rebottle with fresh sample of herb if desired and store in a cool, dark place.
6. Add flavored vinegars to your favorite recipes and share them with friends.

HERBAL VINEGAR COMBINATIONS

Apple Cider Vinegar:

- Dill, Bay, and Garlic
- Horseradish, Shallot, and Hot Red Pepper
- Dill, Mustard seeds, Lemon Balm, and Garlic
- Tarragon, Chives, Lemon Balm, Shallots, and Garlic

Champagne Vinegar:

- Lemon Balm, Lemon Verbena, Lemon Thyme, Lemongrass, and Lemon Zest

Malt Vinegar:

- Tarragon, Garlic Chives, Whole Cloves, Garlic, or Shallot

Red Wine Vinegar:

- Thyme, Rosemary, Hyssop, Fennel, Oregano, and Garlic
- Rosemary, Savory, Sage, Basil, Bay, and Garlic
- Cilantro, Sage, Rosemary, Bay, and Hot Red Pepper
- Sage, Parsley, and Shallots
- Burnet, Borage, and Dill
- Marjoram, Burnet, and Lemon Balm

Sherry Vinegar:

- Basil, Rosemary, Tarragon, Dill, Sorrel, Mint, Chives, and Garlic
- Parsley, Thyme, Rosemary, and Bay
- Rosemary, Oregano, Sage, Basil, Parsley, Garlic, and Black Peppercorns

White Wine Vinegar:

- Basil, Parsley, Fennel, and Garlic
- Dill, Basil, Tarragon, and Lemon Balm
- Oregano, Cilantro, Garlic, and Hot Red Pepper
- Mint, Lemon Balm, and Lemon Basil
- Marjoram, Burnet, Thyme, Tarragon, Parsley, and Chives
- Tarragon, Anise Hyssop, Hyssop, and Lemon Balm
- Savory, Tarragon, Chervil, Basil, and Chives

FLORAL VINEGAR COMBINATIONS

Apple Cider Vinegar:

- Nasturtium flowers and leaves, Shallot, Garlic, and Hot Red Pepper
- Nasturtium, Garlic Chives, and Dill flowers

Champagne Vinegar:

- Rose Flowers and Lemon Balm leaves

Red Wine Vinegar:

- Lovage, Oregano, Marjoram, and Basil flowers
- Nasturtium flowers and Leaves, Shallot, Garlic, and Hot Red Pepper

Rice Vinegar:

- Calendula, Lemon Thyme, Lemon Basil flowers, and Lemon Zest

White Wine Vinegar:

- Chive and Garlic Chive flowers
- Borage and Burnet flowers