

TH Activity Plan – Air Drying Leafy Herbs

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ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will prepare and air dry leafy herbs for using dried leaves in future activities.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Develop new skills for using plant materials from garden; increase focus/attention

Physical: Participate in physical activity as a mechanism to shift mood

Psychological/Emotional: Improve mood; learn about new ways to enhance personal wellness; develop strategies for self-care

Sensory: Tolerate tactile interactions

Social: Make new social connections; build sense of belonging; collaborate with others in small/large group settings

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Harvest flowers (see Notes below) and gather other materials to be used. Wash and gently pat dry harvested flowers. Prepare either (1) a drying screen or piece of cardboard covered with a paper towel for each participant for Option A or (2) rubber bands, string, or twist ties for Option B.
2. Facilitator begins session by demonstrating how to select young growth. Cut 6-12-inch long stems.
3. Remove and discard any dead or diseased leaves and all flowers.
4. Prepare the leaves in one of two drying options:
 - Option A:** Remove leaves and lay them flat on a screen or paper towel/cardboard piece. Do not use a metal tray. Herbs may need to be stirred once or twice a day to allow for ample air circulation and to prevent mold. Store in a cool, well-ventilated area out of sunlight. They should be dry within several days. This option is best for smaller herbs, such as chamomile, chives, or nasturtium, or for herb pieces that are small, such as leaves without stems.
 - Option B:** To air dry herb stems, gather the harvested stems into a small bunch (about a handful or less). Wrap the stems with rubber bands, string, or twist ties, and hang bunches upside down in a cool, well-ventilated area out of sunlight. The herbs should be dry within two weeks. Use this option for herbs that can be dried with the stems attached, like basil, catnip, dill, lemon verbena, mint, oregano, or rosemary. The use of a rubber band has the advantage of getting smaller as the herbs dry and shrink. Often a twist tie or string will allow the stems to slip through and fall to the floor as they lose moisture and shrink.

Materials

Herbs harvested earlier in the day (see Notes below)

Safety scissors

Non-metal screen, piece of burlap, or piece of cardboard & paper towels for each participant

Rubber bands, string or twist ties

Airtight storage containers

Pre-made herbal tea, cups

5. Check the herbs frequently. Turning ones on the tray to facilitate drying and making sure that hanging ones are secure.
6. After herbs have dried, remove leaves from the stems in Option B and crumble larger leaves. Store herbs in airtight non-metal containers in a cool, dry, dark place.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Organize a social tea gathering or support group, where drying leafy herbs is the primary activity and participants sample premade herbal tea (possibly using herb ingredients that participants will be handling during this session) while they work. Host a discussion relative to the group's interests or therapeutic goals or about the herbs they are working with. Discuss activities that can be done with dried herbs, such as making potpourri, sachets, or storing and using in culinary activities. Organize participants into smaller groups centered around one plant per group and have them collaborate to accomplish the leaf drying tasks. Have participants with olfactory sensitivities work with plant materials that have mild to no odor when handling. Present this activity as part of a multi-step program, in which participants are involved with harvesting herbs directly from the garden, drying them, and then using them in a variety of culinary, crafting, or other uses.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Wash hands and follow sanitary food handling procedures throughout activity if herb leaves will be used for culinary purposes. Supervise careful handling of materials and equipment during activity. Use disposable gloves when handling herbs if necessary. Keep dietary and medical restrictions/allergies in mind for both handling and sampling herbs and tea.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Herbs to consider using include basil, chives, oregano, parsley, nasturtium, chamomile, catnip, dill, lemon verbena, mint, oregano, or rosemary. Option A is easier and can be done by all participants. Option B is best for participants who have good hand-eye coordination and can bind bundles with rubber bands, string, or twist ties. Some herbs can be difficult to separate from unused parts after they become dry and brittle, so be sure to separate or cut the needed parts before drying. For the best color, scent, and flavor, herbs should be dried in a dark, cool area, whether indoors or outdoors. Suggested places are garages, attics, closets, or under beds. Be sure the drying area is dry and cool. Herbs can also be dried in the microwave. Dry in small batches and microwave for about 30 seconds at a time until they are dry and crumbly. Drying nasturtium leaves is another way to preserve the plant's peppery goodness. The dried leaves can be powdered and sprinkled onto food as a seasoning or used in herbal tea blends to soothe a cough or cold. To dry nasturtium leaves, spread them onto dehydrator trays and process until crispy. Or, you may dry your edible flower heads in the oven at 100-120 degrees F. Drying takes only a few hours – from 2 to 5 hours – so be sure to check them periodically to measure their progress.

Refer to THAD *Herbal Tea*, *Harvesting Herbs Grown for Leaves*, *Freezing Herbs*, and *Drying Herb Flowers* activity plans.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Andress, E.L. & Harrison, J.A. (2014). Drying herbs. National Center for Home Food Preservation, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. <https://nchfp.uga.edu/how/dry/herbs.html>
Oregon State University Extension. (2013). Food safety & preservation: Drying herbs. <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/documents/8836/sp50921dryingherbs.pdf>

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2023.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.