

Some foodies look down their elongated noses at pre-mixed herb and spice blends. They are right in that one that is made to order may be fresher and better. However some blends sure are useful and make cooking lots easier.

There are too many blends to do just one article about them. So this week we will talk about just herb blends and leave the spice ones for another time.

Before we talk about various herb blends, let's talk about dried herb storage at home. Like most dried items, the herbs you buy or dry yourself have a life span. Just like fresh food, they don't get better with age. "Use them or lose them" is pretty true.

Dried herbs get weaker with time. It will take more of an old one than a new one. Remember the little jar you buy at the store wasn't dried and packed last week. Most of those herbs are months old when you buy them.

I like to buy the large containers of dried herbs from a food supply house, a bulk food distributor or a warehouse store with an active turnover. These are a much better value and are usually in better condition.

You can also buy herbs in bulk at a store like Dayspring. The cost savings can be mighty big.

People say that they can't use that much. Fix that problem by sharing with your neighbors. Have a party and swap herbs. Bring a big container or two and some small jars. You can go home with a dozen or more treasures of dried herbs in good condition.

Store dried herbs in a cool dark place in tightly sealed containers. Don't sit them on a rack behind the stove or cook top.

Also regularly go through an "out with old and in with the new" event. If your herbs are brown, toss them. If they are over a year old, get rid of them and buy some fresh ones. Your recipes will be much better. Don't try to save 18 cents using old herbs and ruin a \$15 fish or piece of meat.

One more thing, purchase herb leaves and not the powdered version. They have a much better flavor and the quality is much greater.

Now let's get to talking about a few classic French herb blends. These are combinations that can be made with fresh herbs, assembled from individual herbs or purchased already blended and ready to use.

The first classic French herb blend is known as "fines herbes" (feen ehrb). This delicate blend is usually added after cooking or just before finishing a dish. It was originally just minced parsley and chives. Later chervil came into the blend. Then tarragon was added. So these four herbs mixed in equal parts make up what is now fines herbes.

Egg and fish dishes really benefit from this blend. Potatoes and other veggies do as well. So do seasoning butters. Mix with melted butter and refrigerate. Then spread the butter on or add it at the last minute to give a dish some extra flavor and color.

One the best-known herb blends from classic French recipes is known as "bouquet garni" (boo-kay gar-nee). This literally means bundle of herbs. It is traditionally made from a combination of thyme, bay, parsley and tarragon. A couple of sprigs of each herb and a bay leaf or two are tied together with kitchen twine. The bundle is put in the pot and simmered away to season the dish. The bundle is removed before serving.

That's it. You can do it yourself or purchase pre-made bundles. You can also put your herbs in a cloth bag or tea strainer ball. Lower these into the liquid and remove before serving. This is a much more economical method and you can use herbs you already have.

Any long-cooked dish can probably benefit from the addition of a bouquet garni.

A great herb blend is "herbs de Provence" (ehrb duh proh-vawn-suh). The commercial versions of this blend usually contain thyme, savory, basil and fennel. You will also see versions that have other herbs like rosemary, oregano and marjoram.

With the addition of these more resinous herbs, the blend becomes stronger and takes longer to cook out the rawness of those herbs.

This blend is fairly new as a commercially produced item. It had its birth in the early 1970's. Little cloth bags decorated with drawings or

designs and filled with herbs were sold all over Provence as souvenirs. By the time I worked with the Fauchon people from Paris, they had them available in their offerings. They used a clay pot to hold the blend.

Food writer Sarah Leah Chase tells us in her book "Pedaling through Provence" that this herb blend almost never contains lavender in Provence. She quickly tells us she likes the addition and always adds it to hers.

In America we most often see lavender flowers added to any herbes de Provence blend. You can purchase dried lavender flowers and add them as you wish to any dish or herb blend. That's what I do.

Herb de Provence and grilled meat, fish or poultry are a great combination. Remember that this summer.

One more French blend is known as "bonnes herbes" (bawn ehrrb). It was made popular in Paris. It is a combination of thyme, dill, basil, tarragon and chervil. A little white pepper is usually found in this blend.

Italian seasoning is another blend of herbs that is readily available. Basil, oregano and marjoram are the usual candidates in this blend. You will also see parsley, thyme, sage or rosemary appear in some versions.

Some Italian seasoning blends get into adding spice, too. Things like salt and garlic are added for more flavor. Be careful with these as the salt content can be high and it will distort the seasoning balance of your recipe.

Whatever you do make sure to try one of these traditional herb blends. It will add authentic flavors to a dish and give an ease of seasoning that will allow you to focus on other parts of your meal or maybe even on a family member. Now there's a good idea.