



The Life of Your Spice

By [Steve Jones](#) - [Outdoor Guide](#) Conservation Editor

Admit it. If we searched your kitchen we'd find a few spices old enough to drive.

Spice abuse is not unique to the kitchens of hunting and fishing families, but some game recipes call for spices we don't reach for every day. Things that may be lurking in old dusty bottles in your spice drawer. That's no way to give your recipe a sporting chance.

The Enemies of Spice:

The four horsemen of the apocalypse are light, heat, time and oxygen. They are formidable opponents and will eventually defeat any spice, but you can slow them down.

Light: The most easily defeated enemy. Store them in a drawer, cupboard, pantry, whatever. Or use an opaque container. Spice stored in the light and in a clear container degrades rapidly. Seriously, throw away your spice rack unless it hangs in a dark pantry.

Heat can be controlled by storing your spices in a cool spot, away from things like your stove, heat registers, etc. A pantry should be perfect. A few should actually be stored in the fridge - things like poppy and sesame seeds.

Time is easy to deal with if you pay attention. "Shelf life" varies based mostly on whether spice is ground or whole. For instance, when ground spice has had a couple of birthdays, throw it away and buy new—even if there's a lot left. Spices not only weaken with age, some (like onion or garlic powder) develop unpleasant flavors. When a spice container enters my house it gets a big expiration date written on it in sharpie.

Shelf life guidelines are more about quality than safety. Older spices are not usually unhealthy unless they've gone moldy or something. It's a matter of flavor. Some spices are more naturally volatile than others. If you don't follow good storage practices the shelf life can drop dramatically: If you are religious about storage practices you can likely get a bit more than these guidelines, but don't get cocky:

- Ground - 2 years
- Whole - 4 years
- Leafy Herbs - 2 years
- Blends - 2 years
- Extracts - 4 years

Yeah, I know. Spices are expensive and it seems wasteful not to use them up. Get over it. What do you do with old milk? Toss it and buy new. Do the same with spices. Put a reminder in your calendar to go through them once a year, tossing the expired stuff and adding it to your shopping list. A convenient time would be every Fall when daylight saving time ends - the same time you change your

smoke alarm batteries.

Oxygen is the toughest enemy. If your storage and inventory practices are good you can mostly get away with letting oxygen do its thing. But there are some tricks you can play to weaken this formidable opponent.

Kitchen vacuum sealers (Foodsaver, etc.) have become popular in recent years. Many spices seal up perfectly in vacuum bags -- oxygen free. Some things do better sealed in jars than in bags.

Many vacuum sealers have optional apparatus designed to connect from the sealer to a mason jar with a canning lid. These work well, though if the spice is powdery it can rise up and foul the seal while the sealer is pulling the air out. That is a pain. Some folks wad up a clean paper towel to serve as a sort of filter between the spice and the top of the jar, but that can be a little messy when you next open the jar to get at the goodies.

Obviously you don't want to make it inconvenient to get to your spices at cooking time. If buying in bulk consider vacuum sealing the "mother load" and periodically opening it to replenish your go-to jar.

A warning about vacuum sealing: Nearly all spices and herbs are dry, but if sealing something moist you should store it refrigerated or frozen. The spore that causes botulism (a rare but potentially fatal illness) likes a moist anaerobic (no air) environment and non-acidic foods (like meat and vegetables). If you provide that environment the poisonous spores can develop between 38° and 122°F—just about the whole temperature range between the fridge and the oven. So never vacuum seal anything moist unless it is destined for the fridge or freezer, or you know it's acidic..

Referring back to shelf life, you know those lids that have a rotating disc to select "sprinkle" or "pour"? With no twist lid to provide a proper seal? I call those "1 year tops". Because any spice held in them should be tossed after 1 year, tops. It's like storing your spice with the lid off.

Ground or whole?

Ground or powdered spices have a bad rap. While whole spices are often better, ground has its place. In some recipes, especially in sausage making, ground is the clear best choice.

True, grinding a spice makes it more susceptible to the four enemies. Most spices owe their magic to "volatile oils" which dissipate more quickly when exposed. If you've ever compared the smell of fresh ground nutmeg to pre-ground, you know what I'm saying.

If you want the best results and are willing to go the extra mile, grind whole spices yourself as needed for immediate use - or in small quantities for short term storage. A cheap coffee grinder dedicated to the task takes up very little counter space, does a nice job, and should last you forever.

But if you store them properly and replace them on a good schedule, ground spice is fine (pun intended).

Where to Buy Spice

A few years ago I experimented with baking rye bread (sorry ladies—I'm already taken) and was shocked that the caraway seeds in the grocery store were the most expensive ingredient, just about doubling the cost of the loaf. On the internet I found sources at a small fraction of the cost. I ordered a whole pound for less than two tiny jars from the grocery store, even with shipping. I was hooked, and have bought spice in bulk ever since. I store them in mason jars.

The downside is that you might not use them up before they get stale. Even if there is plenty left when it is time to toss them you could still be ahead on the cost compared to buying in the grocery store. If it's a spice you use rarely and or only in small quantities, bulk probably doesn't make sense.

Another great thing about the world of online spices is the amazing selection. Your imagination can run wild with the options available. No recipe is too exotic in the days of the internet.

Some bulk stores will have a minimum purchase, but if you plan in advance you should be able to handle that. Here are some sources I have had good luck with:

atlanticspice.com sfherb.com herbco.com sausagemaker.com bulkfoods.com
myspicer.com psseasoning.com butcher-packer.com alliedkenco.com

Prices and shipping costs vary widely, so shop carefully. For instance, one boutique spice website charged \$6.89 PER OUNCE for cut and sifted rosemary, when another charged \$1.12 for four ounces. And don't overlook Costco or Sam's—there won't be a wide selection but what they have will be fresh and economical.

No matter where you buy, grocery store or online, when storing it take a moment to clearly mark the container with the expiration date for easy checking later.

Be a Blooming Idiot

Blooming maximizes the effectiveness of your spice. Think of it as turbo-charging. It generally involves heating them up a bit. It falls short of charring or scorching, which produces much different, often undesirable results.

Googling "blooming spices" will reveal many methods to bloom your spices. They're pretty simple. Here's one:

Take the fat in your recipe (butter, oil, etc.) and heat it to medium temp in a pan. Add your spices, mixing, for about a minute.

Ta da! Now carry on with the rest of your recipe.

The Spice Co-op, and the Christmas Spice Fairy

I'll close with a couple of ideas that may convince you to start buying your spices in bulk.

First, the **co-op**. You and some friends or relatives coordinate and place one big order every year or two, getting together for a spice packing party to split it all up, take it home, and replace your old stuff. That could be a fun social event, and an inexpensive way to ensure you always have fresh spices on hand.

Or maybe you'd prefer to be the **Christmas Spice Fairy** (yeah, I'm still working on the name), a holiday tradition that might save you money and hassle for your holiday shopping. Place an annual order for common spices in bulk, divide them up into small mason jars, put together collections of the spices and use them as Christmas presents -- making it a tradition to give the same thing every year, or doing some spices in even years and others in odd years.

You crafters could even get fancy with labeling - coming up with your own "brand". You could spice things up (sorry) by including a different exotic or unusual spice every year, along with an interesting recipe that highlights that spice. Or maybe create your own signature blend!

All of your recipients could throw away their old stale spices every Christmas and be reminded of you the whole year as they enjoy fresh spices in every meal.

Grow Your Own

Nothing, absolutely nothing, beats fresh. Grow your own and you can branch out into all sorts of killer ideas like making compound butters or herb vinegar.

Here are a few common spices and herbs that grow well in Missouri and Illinois gardens:

- **Annual:** dill, basil, garlic, parsley and coriander/cilantro.
- **Perennial:** sage, thyme, chives, oregano, tarragon, fennel, anise, mint, savory, caraway (biennial), and horseradish. Some (like rosemary and peppers) grow fine but won't survive freezing so most of us treat them as annuals — but growing them in large pots you bring inside for the winter works great.

Bon appetit!

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