



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 Four Horsemen of the Spice Apocalypse:

The enemies are light, heat, time and oxygen. All are formidable opponents and will eventually defeat any spice. But you can slow them down.

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

Heat: Also easy to control by storing your spices in a cool spot, away from things like your stove, heat registers, etc. A pantry is perfect. Some oily or fatty seeds should actually be stored in the fridge - things like poppy and sesame seeds.

Time: 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 powder) might develop unpleasant flavors. When a spice container enters my house it gets a big expiration date written on it in sharpie.

Shelf life is about quality, not safety. Older spices are not unhealthy unless they've gone moldy or something. It's a matter of flavor. 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

Sure, 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 — when you change your smoke alarm

batteries.

Oxygen: 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.

Buying only spices in a well-sealed container, or transferring them to one when you get them home, should be the minimum. But even better is vacuum sealing.

External suction type vacuum sealers (Foodsaver, etc.) have become popular. They don't remove as much air as chamber type vacuum sealers, but they are much cheaper and take up way less counter space.

Many spices seal up perfectly in vacuum bags. Whole peppercorns, for instance. Some things are better sealed in jars. Many suction type vacuum sealers have attachments 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. 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 messy when you next open the jar to get at the goodies.

Obviously, you need to keep your spices conveniently close to hand at cooking time. If buying in bulk consider vacuum sealing the "mother load", using it to periodically replenish your handy go-to jar.

One last thing about air. You know those lids that have a rotating plastic 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. The only exception would be for salt, which has a longer shelf life than you or me.

Ground or whole?

Whole (when appropriate) or fresh ground (when practical) are of course best. But pre-ground or powdered spices have a place in every kitchen.

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 reasonable schedule, look fondly upon your ground spices.

Where to Buy Spice

A few years ago I got interested in baking rye bread (sorry ladies—I'm taken) and was shocked to find 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 fraction of the cost. I ordered a 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 my pantry in mason jars, sealed in my chamber-type vacuum sealer.

The downside of buying in bulk is that you might not use them up before they reach their shelf life. Even if there is plenty left when it is time to toss them you could still be ahead on the cost. But if it's a spice you use rarely or only in small quantities, bulk doesn't make sense.

A big advantage of buying online is the amazing selection. Your imagination can run wild with the options available. No recipe is too exotic in the days of the internet. Local ethnic markets can also be good sources of spices you have trouble finding in the grocery store.

Some bulk stores will have a minimum purchase, but if you plan in advance and order once every year or two, 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 charges \$6.89 PER OUNCE for cut and sifted rosemary, while another charges \$1.12 for four ounces of the same thing. 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, ethnic market or online, when storing it take a moment to clearly mark the container with the expiration date for easy checking later.

The Spice Co-op, and the Christmas Spice Fairy

Here are 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 one new 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 toss 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

I'll close with my favorite way to defeat the 4 horsemen. 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.

The internet can help you determine your "plant hardiness zone", and what will grow well there. For my home in zone 6 here are a few common spices and herbs that grow well:

- **Annual:** dill, basil, garlic, parsley and coriander/cilantro.
- **Perennial:** sage, thyme, chives, oregano, tarragon, fennel, anise, mint, savory, caraway (biennial), bay laurel and horseradish. Some (like bay, rosemary and peppers) grow fine but won't survive freezing. Us midwesterners must bring them inside for the winter — or just treat them as annuals and start new every year.

Bon appetit!

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