

HOW TO GROW, GATHER & DRY CALENDULA

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Latin Name: *Calendula officinalis* Family: Asteraceae

Place of origin: Southern Europe Part used: flowers, leaf, stem

Thermal nature and flavor: warm, dry, bitter, slightly pungent

Cultivating: This brightly colored flower grows easily as an annual. For years I have grown an orange variety from Strictly Medicinal Seeds. Calendula can be started inside or direct seeded into the garden in early spring. Calendula reseeds readily in the garden and can also be grown in containers on a sunny deck. Calendula grows best in full sun and in well-drained soil that has compost worked into the garden bed. When direct seeding or transplanting seedlings, give 6-8 inches between plants so they will have room grow. On our farm we have created a 3-year rotation system in the garden for our calendula beds. I believe it is better for the soil and for the health of an annual crop to not be planted in the same bed year after year. We aim to pull our annual crops, like calendula, out of the ground by late October. Each bed is then given a thick layer of compost which we gently fork into the soil and then cover with straw. These composted and mulched beds are ready for us to plant a different herb into the following spring. When putting gardens to bed, best to never leave bare soil exposed as this can cause erosion. Mulch or leave planted with a cover crop.

Collecting: Here on our farm in Maine (zone 5) we seed calendula into 50-plug trays at the end of April and transplant them into the garden 3-4 weeks later. These plants begin to flower in early July. We collect the blossoms two to four times per week, in the morning when the flowers are fresh and once the dew is no longer present. I prefer to use my fingers when picking each flower and have found finger-picking to be more efficient than using clippers. I also love feeling the flowers' sticky antiseptic resin on my fingers. We collect the flowers every few days because we are looking to gather newly opened flowers whose petals are open and still in an upward gesture. I am careful to not place enormous amounts of flowers into one basket as they will start to wilt if piled too high on top of each other. (When gathering more

than one basket, be sure to leave your first basket in the shade while gathering your next basket) Once the harvest is complete, we carry our baskets into the herb drying room, record their weight, and lay the blossoms on their sides on nylon-mesh screens to dry (avoid metal screens).

Drying: Calendula flowers contain a large amount of water. 8 pounds of fresh flowers equals about 1 pound of dried flowers. We lay each flower on its side so as the flower dries it curls into a tiny ball and the petals stay attached to the flower's center. If laid face down on a screen the petals tend to fall off the center of the flower more easily. Take extra care as the flowers dry-may take 8-10 days based on humidity for them to be fully dry. The ideal temperature for drying herbs is 80-100F. Having a fan for circulating air and a dehumidifier in your drying space is helpful. Be sure windows have curtains as direct sunlight will fade the color of herbs. Some people have success drying herbs with a dehydrator. If possible, use one that has stainless trays not plastic or place thin cotton muslin cloth over plastic trays. Once dry, store your herbs in a glass jar in a dark cupboard or inside clean brown paper bags that then go inside plastic bags. Be sure to place these bags in a dark, cool, dry and protected closet or cupboard, away from any heat or sunlight. Dried calendula has a shelf life for about a year. The color does fade over the year. If I have any dried calendula left from the year before I use them in foot baths and spiritual baths.

“Ultimately I think gardening speaks to a deep-seated (deed-seeded) desire to experience the real, the essential, the astonishingly possible. To garden is gradually to give up control, to fall literally to one's knees and come into closer and closer contact with the tremendous and often bewildering beauty of the living world. Nothing, you find, is at all what you thought it was. Dirt is not dirt, but a teeming mass of microorganisms that turns death back into life.”

-Joyce McGeevy, Gardening by Heart