

SAN FRANCISCO HERB CO.

SUPERIOR HERBS & SPICES, TEA AND POTPOURRI INGREDIENTS

SPICES - SPRING CHECK

It's a good idea to take an occasional inventory of the spices in your cabinet. They should be checked for freshness to make sure they've retained their potency. Knowing what our spices looked, tasted, and smelled like when they were purchased is worth remembering. The paprika was very red in color and had a sweet spicy bite. Has it lost its color and become bland in flavor? The ability to recall the original condition is important in making the judgment call that a particular spice is no longer of value and needs to be replaced.

True spices are hardy seeds, barks, and roots. Whole spices last longer than powdered ones. Leafy herbs do not last as long as hard spices. Though a common rule is to purchase spices for no more than one year's use, with proper storage spices should last five years or more. Powdered herbs and spice blends with oil content (lemon pepper, etc.) should be used within one year.

Glass is the ideal non-porous barrier for storing spices. Spice jars of clear glass with tight-fitting lids work well. Plastic spice jars can suffer deterioration from caustic oils or leach flavor from certain spices. Metal ointment tins are popular, but opaque, hiding the condition of the contents.

Proper storage greatly increases the shelf-life of spices and herbs. Spices should be stored in a cool, dark place away from heat. Keep spices away from the stove area, unless they are for immediate use. The spice rack belongs on a wall in the kitchen away from heat, direct light, and excessive moisture.

Spices that are of reddish color (chili family) such as paprika, cayenne, chili powder, and Cajun blends store longer and stay fresher if kept in the refrigerator. Chilis will oxidize at room temperature, turning reddish powders a lifeless brown. Culinary herbs that are very green such as parsley, dill, chives, and cilantro also benefit from cold storage. Both flavor and color are retained when these herbs are refrigerated. Seeds with high oil contents, like poppy and sesame, also store best in the refrigerator. Oils can become rancid over time.

Other spices and herbs store well in the cabinet or on the spice rack. Leafy herbs such as basil, marjoram, and rosemary last about a year. Powdered spices keep well for three or four years. Whole spices can retain their potency for five years or longer. Vanilla beans will last almost indefinitely if packed tightly in a glass jar to keep them from drying out.

One other factor that has a considerable influence on the shelf-life of spices is the quality of the products when they are purchased. Some of the spices at the supermarket have already been on the shelf for some time. Companies that specialize in spices are the best source. On the West Coast there is The San Francisco Herb Company 1-800-227-4530 www.sfherb.com, on the East Coast is Atlantic Spice Co. 1-800-316-7965 www.atlanticspice.com