Spices and herbs liven up your meals and make a dish go from “OK” to “Oh, wow!” However, most of us don’t use our spices properly.

The flavors of spices and herbs are due to aromatic oils present in the product. These oils dissolve over time. The lesson is, “Fresh is king!” If your spices and herbs have been in your cabinet for more than two years, they probably are not as flavorful as they once were. Smell and taste them before you use them. If the taste is faint, double up on the measurement to get enough flavor. If you can’t tell if it is parsley or sage — throw it out and start fresh.

The freshest herbs and spices (other than those herbs you grow at home) are available in the bulk section of the grocery store. They are also the cheapest. Fifteen dollars a pound sounds like a lot of money, until you consider that a pound of parsley might fill up a bushel basket. So, buy bulk and only buy what you will use in a year. Don’t fall into the trap of buying pound containers from our local warehouse store, unless it is something that you use daily. In my case, chili powder is about the only thing I use enough to use up one pound in a year.

Where do you store your spices? Cool and dark places are best. So, the cabinet above the stove is probably not the best place to store them. Something that is used less frequently could even be stored in the refrigerator or freezer to protect the flavor.

When I shop in the bulk section of the store, I come home with little plastic bags of flavorings. I usually transfer them to small jars and carefully label them. Note the date you put them in the jar and the product. Many herbs have a similar appearance, so a label will avoid confusion later.

If you really want to spend a mint on your seasonings, go for the little pre-measured packets. Not only do you get lots of preservatives that you might not want, but also you will pay handsomely for them. I keep both a Mexican seasoning and an Italian seasoning mix in my kitchen. They work whether I’m doing tacos or chili or spaghetti or lasagna.
I can make enough Mexican seasoning to season a pound of taco meat for just a few cents. That is a huge savings over the $1.50 pre-measured packages in the store.

Here are the recipes that I use:

- Italian herb seasoning — 1 teaspoon of each of the following dried herbs: oregano, basil, marjoram, rosemary, thyme, sage and savory.

- Mexican seasoning — 1/4 cup chili powder, 2 tablespoons dried basil leaves, 2 tablespoons ground cumin, 1 tablespoon dried thyme, 2 tablespoons ground coriander, 1 tablespoon garlic powder, 2 tablespoons oregano leaves, ¾ teaspoon cayenne powder.

I keep these seasoning mixes in a glass jar and store them in the refrigerator. Be sure to write the date on the top of the jar as you mix it up, so that you’ll be able to keep track of how fresh it is. As for how much to use, it depends on your recipe and your tastes. I start with 1 teaspoon for a pound of meat, then add more if my recipe needs it.

Please note that there is no salt in either recipe. Most of us eat too much salt, so try reducing (or eliminating) the salt in your main dishes. Use the seasoning mix, then salt to taste. You’ll find you use far less salt because the mixes add lots of flavor. Your blood pressure will thank you for it.

Spices and herbs add lots of flavor to your meals. Buy smart to make sure they don’t become a major cost of meals.

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