



martha stewart





What to Do With Expired Spices

Here's how to tell if your spices are past their prime—and the best ways to use them (that don't involve cooking!).

By **Bridget Shirvell** | Published on February 20, 2024



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If you're anything like us, you have a rack or two full of spices. There's the paprika you reach for every time you make a [roast chicken](#), cayenne powder to give that [hot chocolate a kick](#), and, of course, [cinnamon](#) for sprinkling on basically everything. Still, every once in a while, we reach into the back of our spice rack and pull out a jar of chili powder or another spice we had forgotten about, causing us to wonder do spices go bad and what we should do with spices that are past their prime. We talked to the experts for advice.

MEET THE EXPERT

Ethan Frisch, co-founder of single-origin spice company [Burlap & Barrel](#)

Lior Lev Sercarz, founder and owner of spice brand [La Boîte](#) and author of several spice books, including *The Spice Companion*.

Serge Krikorian, head chef and owner of [Vibrant Occasions Catering](#)

RELATED: [How to Store Spices to Keep Them Organized—and Make Cooking Easier](#)

Do Spices Go Bad?

"Spices do not expire in the traditional sense of food 'going bad,' or having the potential to make you sick. However, they do lose their potency and flavor over time," says Serge Krikorian, chef and co-owner of Vibrant Occasions Catering. It can take years for that to happen, though.



Try these methods to determine if your spices are no longer at their best.

Look For the "Best By" Date

Spice packaging should have a "Best By" date. That date is usually based on when the spices were packed into jars but not always when the spice was harvested. When buying spices, look for the farthest away Best By date you can. But also know that a spice that is past its "Best By" date or "Best Before" date isn't necessarily bad.

"Even after the 'Best By' date has passed, spices are still typically safe to eat. You may need to double the amount listed in the recipe to get the desired flavor, though, since they will likely have lost much of their potency," says Ethan Frisch of single-origin spice company Burlap & Barrel.

Assess Their Potency

Do not rush to discard spices based on the date; many have a longer shelf or, as Frisch mentioned, can still be used, just in different amounts.

"The easiest way to test spices is simply to smell them and taste a small amount," says Lior Lev Sercarz, founder and owner of spice brand La Boîte and author of several spice books, including *The Spice Companion*. "They should have a nice scent and good flavor. You, of course, want to avoid a rancid scent."

What to Do With Expired Spices

If you have smelled and tasted the cinnamon, and while the scent was still pleasant, the flavor seemed off; what should you do?



Replace Them

"Spices aren't nearly as precious as people seem to think," says Frisch. "If your spices are significantly past their 'Best By' date or no longer have much flavor, replace them! You can buy fresh, high-quality spices for \$10 or less per jar, which translates to pennies per serving. Your taste buds will thank you!"

While you don't want to cook or bake with tasteless and scentless spices, tossing them should be a last resort.

Compost Them

If you have a backyard compost, you can throw your spices in it. If you have municipal composting, you'll need to check that spices are accepted.

Give Them a New (Non-Culinary) Life

Make a Simmering Potpourri: Breathe new life into your home with aromatic potpourri by simmering water with your favorite expired herbs and spices.

Use as Insect Repellent: Craft small sachets of expired spices to banish pests. Did you know that cockroaches hate the smell of bay leaves? You can also try using cinnamon to repel ants; no need for a sachet either—sprinkle expired cinnamon where ants enter your home.

Keep Animals Out of Your Garden: Sprinkling expired pepper spices such as chili pepper, cayenne pepper, or crushed red pepper is a natural deterrent for deer, rabbits, and voles.

Create a Natural Fungicide: In addition to keeping animals out of your garden, you can use expired cinnamon to combat fungus on plants. Mix one teaspoon of cinnamon with two cups of water, let sit for at least a few



Freshen Up Your Carpet: Spices such as rosemary or ginger can be used as a natural carpet refresher. Simply sprinkle a little on before vacuuming.

Scent Homemade Soap: Spices and herbs, including lavender, cinnamon, rosemary, and ginger, that are past their prime can be added to [homemade soap mixtures](#).

Color Eggs for Easter: Turmeric or paprika mixed with water and brought to a boil [creates a decorative food coloring perfect for making Easter eggs](#). Just remember to add a tablespoon or two of vinegar after removing it from the stove and before adding the eggs.

Keep Plants Healthy: Thyme, rosemary, bay leaf, and oregano are chock full of minerals and vitamins that can help you grow strong, healthy plants.

How to Keep Spices Fresh (So You Don't Need to Deal With Expired Ones)

First, to prevent your spices from losing their flavor and potency, curate a spice collection that works for you.

Most of the world's spices are grown on smallholder farms, where farmers sell their entire harvest to a middleman who sells the spices he buys to someone else who sells all the spices he buys to someone else until, eventually, they make it to a supermarket aisle. That means that along with losing traceability, spices are often already old by the time they reach the supermarket aisle.

Buying small amounts from specialty stores with traceability ensures your spices will be fresher when you bring them home.

"Buy small amounts of spices and replenish them as needed," says Sercarz. Do not be tempted to buy large amounts just because the price is good.



different palate and style of cooking, so buy what works for you—that way you'll use it.

Whole spices will hold their flavors longer than their ground counterparts, so if it's a spice you don't use very often, you may want to buy whole and invest in a good spice grinder.

Once you have your spices, store them in airtight containers in a cool, dark part of your kitchen. No placing them above your oven or stove.

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