

Flavorful and Functional!

Herbs & Spices

Herb vs Spice

The leaf of a plant used in cooking is generally referred to as a culinary herb. Any other part of the plant, such as the buds, bark, roots, berries, seeds, and the stigma of a flower is called a spice. Herbs and spices have a long history and new research is exploring the possible therapeutic uses for herbs and spices used in cooking – primarily for their antioxidant, antimicrobial, and antiviral properties.

7 Spices for Health

Curcumin, found in turmeric and curry powder, contains curcuminoids that appear to have antioxidant, antiviral, antibacterial, and antifungal properties with potential activity against cancer, diabetes, arthritis, Alzheimer's and other chronic diseases. Cinnamon's active ingredients are polyphenols which scientists think may act like insulin – however recent studies show it has only a possible modest effect. Cayenne pepper (ground red pepper) is a concentrated source of capsaicin, a phytochemical that may target pathways involved in cancer development and inflammation. Oregano has antioxidants, phytochemicals and antimicrobial activity. Rosemary, like other green herbs, has antioxidants and antimicrobial properties linked to its polyphenol composition. Ginger is a mixture of several hundred chemicals including gingerols, salicylate, and curmucin which may play a role preventing chronic disease. Thyme, nutmeg, garlic, mint and basil are also being studied. However, scientists point out that more research is needed before intake amount or supplement recommendations are made.

Mix it up

In the meantime, there are many dietary implications for increasing your intake of herbs and spices. They help lower salt, fat and sugar intake as well as support an increase in the variety of food intake and thus, nutrient diversity. For example, they are an alternative to salt as a seasoning, they support an increased intake of fruits and vegetables by adding flavor and interest, and they improve low fat cooking methods for foods such as soups, salad dressings, and marinades. Herbs are clustered into families so traditional combinations may be exchanged with others from the same family. For example, the mint family contains not only mint but basil, marjoram, oregano, sage, thyme and rosemary. The parsley family includes parsley, dill and coriander (cilantro). Conduct your own experiments and enjoy the flavor of herbs and spices!

SUPERFOODS



Spice Up Your Life...

with Herbs and Spices

Your healthy grocery list is about to get spicier! Though herbs have been used for hundreds of years to heal, scientists are finally starting to research these plants' abilities to deliver on health benefits. Emerging science shows that many spices are also potent defenders of good health. To spice up your life, add these herbs and spices to your grocery list.

Herbs for Health

Oregano - Fresh or dried, oregano is a herb that has significant amounts of vitamin K, manganese, iron and dietary fiber (and is also a good source of calcium, vitamin A and C). Oregano is a strong antibacterial agent and has an antioxidant capacity that is 42 times more active than apples, 30 times more than potatoes and 12 times more than oranges^{1,3}.

Basil - The fresh and aromatic form of basil has many similar nutrients to oregano including plenty of vitamin K. Not only is basil a delicious addition to many dishes, it can prevent foods from being contaminated by bacteria. Basil also fights inflammation and may help promote cardiovascular health^{1,2}.

Rosemary - The wonderful smell of rosemary creates more than just great food. Rosemary contains substances that may improve digestion and stimulate the immune system. It also improves circulation, and increases blood flow to the head and brain, thus improving concentration³.



Super Spices

Turmeric - The main spice found in yellow curry powder, turmeric, contains curcumin which is a compound that may inhibit cancer cell growth and promote health of the brain. Some studies suggest that it may even protect against Alzheimer's disease⁴.

Ginger - This spice, derived from the ginger root, has long been used as a natural remedy for nausea, morning sickness and other stomach discomforts. Combined with its natural antibacterial, antifungal and anti-inflammatory properties, ginger may be a great spice for healing.

Cinnamon - This fragrant spice, traditionally used for baking, has the highest antioxidant capacity of any spice. In ancient Chinese medicine, cinnamon was used to improve energy and vitality. It has anti-inflammatory properties and is a powerful antimicrobial agent. New research shows that cinnamon may even help regulate blood sugar levels⁵.

Add these herbs and spices to a variety of foods and not only will your meals will be full of flavor, but also brimming with tasty nutrition, antioxidants and healing benefits.

For more information on the health benefits of spices, check out the 7 Super Spices at:

<http://www.mccormick.com/SpicesForHealth.aspx>.

References:

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BALANCED CHOICES[®]
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Fresh Herbs

With vibrant flavor and concentrated nutritional power, fresh herbs offer a bouquet of delights.

By CARY NEFF

The dried herbs in your cabinet can spice up meals in a pinch. But nothing beats fresh herbs for enhancing the flavor and appearance of even the most mundane dishes. They also reduce the need for added salt and fat — and offer vital nutrients.

Food Basics

Most herbs available in the United States are the fragrant leaves of plants from either the mint or the carrot family. Their strong flavor comes from essential oils that are a plant's first line of defense against predators. Mint-family herbs (like basil, oregano, rosemary, sage and thyme) carry pungent oils on their leaves. Carrot-family herbs (including cilantro, dill and parsley) store their aromatic oils in canals within the leaf. Look for herbs that are deep green and crisp, and free of dark spots, yellowing and signs of wilting.

Nutritional Know-How

Both dried and fresh herbs provide vitamins, phytonutrients and antioxidants that promote cardiovascular health, reduce inflammation and prevent cancer. But fresh herbs are almost always tastier and more nutritious (the drying process reduces flavor and nutrients).

Basil is a good source of vitamin A and magnesium, which can improve cardiovascular health. It also contains flavonoids — plant compounds that act as powerful antioxidants, which inhibit the production of cancer-causing free radicals in the body. Oregano delivers more healthful antioxidants than any other herb; 1 tablespoon provides as much antioxidant punch as an apple. The oils in parsley combat tumor formation in the lungs, and its high levels of vitamins A and C bolster the immune system and help combat diseases including atherosclerosis, diabetes and asthma.

EAT UP!

Fresh herbs' delicate flavors are lost when cooked for long periods, so it's best to use them raw or add them near the end of cooking time. When substituting fresh herbs for dried, use 3 teaspoons of fresh for every 1 teaspoon dried.

- Avoid combining equal portions of strong herbs because their flavors will compete. Instead, reduce one of the herbs by half so it complements the other and elevates it as a main flavor.
- Fresh basil complements tomatoes, garlic, olive oil, nuts, vinegars, squash, peppers, eggplant, mushrooms and poultry. Its flavor is best when cut into thin strips. Stack the leaves and roll tightly, then cut the roll into thin strips using a sharp knife or gently tear by hand.
- Fresh oregano adds a dynamic dimension to chicken, lamb, peppers, tomatoes, mushrooms, egg dishes, salad dressings, olive oil and breads. To prepare, wash, pat dry with a paper towel, strip from stems and chop into small pieces.

Kitchen Tricks

- **Pick up fresh herbs close to the time you plan to use them, and wash only prior to using to prevent wilting.**
- **Loosely wrap fresh herbs in paper towels and place in plastic bags pierced with holes in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator.**
- **Use potted herb plants as edible decorations in your kitchen. The plants will provide convenient opportunities to add delicious flavors to your favorite dishes.**
- **Freezing excess herbs for later use is a more nutritious alternative to drying. Wash, pat dry, wrap loosely in freezer wrap and freeze in plastic bags. Or chop herbs into small pieces, place in ice cube trays, fill with filtered water and freeze. Add frozen herb cubes directly to sauces, soups or vegetables.**

WEB EXTRA!

For details on how to prepare Parsley Walnut Pesto and Fine Herb Crusted Salmon, see the online version of this article at experiencelifemag.com.

Chef Cary Neff is the president of the consulting firm Culinary Innovations and the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Conscious Cuisine* (Sourcebooks, 2002).

Garlic

With its robust, complex flavor and healthful qualities, garlic can add zest to any meal — and help ward off disease.

By CARY NEFF

Garlic is sometimes referred to as the “stinking rose.” In folklore, its pungent aroma has been credited with warding off evil spirits and vampires. Today, scientific studies tell us that this small, aromatic herb can help heal all sorts of ailments: Garlic can reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke and cancer, and it’s a strong antibacterial and antiviral agent. And, of course, it’s a delicious addition to all kinds of great meals.

Food Basics

Garlic belongs to the same plant genus as onions, leeks and chives. There are three major types of garlic available in the United States: white-skinned, strong-flavored American garlic; mauve-colored, milder-flavored Mexican and Italian garlic; and the even milder elephant garlic (not a true garlic, but aptly named for its extremely large cloves). You can purchase garlic in dehydrated and powdered forms, freeze dried, or in a paste, but whenever possible, reach for fresh garlic (preferably plump, compact and free of soft spots) to experience its crisp and vibrant flavor — and its best nutritional benefits.

Nutritional Know-How

Regular consumption of garlic has been shown to lower blood pressure, help prevent atherosclerosis and diabetic heart disease, reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke, decrease free radicals in the blood stream, and inhibit the growth of cancer cells. That’s because garlic is rich in vitamins C and B6, selenium, manganese, and a variety of sulfur compounds. The compound allicin, one of the sources of garlic’s strong odor, is a powerful antibacterial and antiviral agent. To stimulate the enzymatic process that converts the phytonutrient alliin (a sulfoxide) into allicin, chop or crush the garlic, then wait several minutes before eating or cooking it. Avoid cooking garlic quickly: It inhibits the enzymatic process and doesn’t dissipate the odor.

Kitchen Tricks

- **Store in a cool, dry, dark place — such as a loosely lidded ceramic dish, terra-cotta pot or glass jar. Avoid freezing uncooked garlic (it turns mushy when thawed).**
- **To peel cloves, place them flat-side down on a cutting board or flat surface. Gently press down with the flat side of a wide knife until the skin splits, making it easy to peel the skin away and expose a clean clove.**
- **To remove garlic odor from your fingers, rub them against stainless steel — such as a kitchen sink or the inside of a spoon — under running water for about a minute. Or wash them with a tablespoon of table salt or baking soda and some warm water.**

EAT UP!

Many people avoid eating garlic because of its strong odor. Raw garlic can be pretty powerful, but when cooked, garlic is milder and sweeter on the palate — and less lingering on your breath.

■ When cooking garlic in stir-fry or sauté dishes, add as late in recipe as possible and cook no longer than one minute over medium heat to prevent burning. When cooking separately, first heat some olive oil in a large pan, then add the garlic. Stir repeatedly to prevent sticking.

■ When preparing soups or stews, first sauté denser vegetables like carrots, onions and celery. Then add garlic to prevent it from overcooking.

■ To roast garlic, cut off the very top of the bulb to expose the tips of the cloves. Rub exposed garlic with extra-virgin olive oil, salt and pepper. Wrap in foil and bake in preheated 325-degree F oven for 1½ hours, or until the cloves are soft and lightly brown on top. Allow to cool for three to five minutes, and then squeeze each clove from its skin. Spread directly on sliced bread or crackers for a delicious hors d’oeuvre, or mix with fresh cooked vegetables to create a spectacular side dish.

WEB EXTRA!

For details on how to prepare Roast Garlic Soup with Parmesan Crisp, Broccoli Rabe with Toasted Garlic and Sautéed Swiss Chard, check out the online version of this article at www.experiencelifemag.com.

Chef Cary Neff is the president of the consulting firm Culinary Innovations and the author of *Conscious Cuisine* (Sourcebooks, 2002).