

Herbs & Spices for Taste and Health

Herbs & Spices

Herbs and spices have been used to flavor and preserve foods for centuries. Many cooking herbs and spices have also been used in traditional medicine and we now find they have the power to fight cancer cells, destroy harmful bacteria, lower cholesterol, help regulate blood sugar and blood pressure with powerful antioxidant, anti-bacterial, anti-viral, and anti-inflammatory compounds.

Use fresh herbs when available for more nutrients. Cut ends of stems and place fresh herbs in glass of water in the refrigerator. Store dried herbs and spices in a sealed container and keep in a cool, dry place. Buy bulk dried herbs and spices to keep them fresh. Exposure to air, heat and light can destroy flavor and nutritional properties.

Herb: leaf of a plant; 1 tablespoon fresh = 1 teaspoon dried

Spice: buds, bark, roots, berries, seeds, stigma of flower

A few popular herbs that are grown locally:

Basil

Basil is native to India and has been cultivated for over 5,000 years. Basil is used in natural medicine to lower cholesterol and risk of heart disease. Basil also contains plant compounds called flavanoids that have antioxidant properties and protects against some cancers in animal studies. Basil is one of the highest herb sources of the phytonutrient beta-carotene, the plant form of vitamin A. Some of the volatile oils which occur naturally in basil, have antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties. Different varieties of basil contain a wide array of other beneficial phytonutrients also found in citrus, anise, cinnamon, geraniums, mint and cloves. Basil is also a source of magnesium, iron, calcium, potassium, manganese, vitamins C and K.

Mint

Mint has been used around the world for its culinary, medicinal and aromatic properties. Perhaps best known as a natural breath freshener and digestive aid. Mint may positively affect digestion via its ability to relax smooth muscles in the GI tract and the aroma of mint activates salivary glands in the mouth that produce digestive enzymes. Mint may help relieve nausea and rosmarinic acid in peppermint may also help asthma sufferers through a variety of actions including blocking the formation of pro-inflammatory chemicals and encouraging cells to make a substance that keeps airways open for easier breathing. Mint has also shown both analgesic and anesthetic effects and one of the phytonutrients found in peppermint oil stopped the growth of certain tumors and protected against the formation of other cancers in animal studies (needs to be tested in humans). Essential oils in peppermint also stop the growth of various fungi and bacteria including *H. pylori* (associated with ulcer formation), salmonella enteritidis, *E. coli* O157:H7, and methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). Peppermint is an excellent source of manganese, vitamin C and carotenoids (plant forms of vitamin A) and a good source of dietary fiber, folate, iron, potassium, copper, magnesium, calcium, and vitamin B2 (riboflavin).

Oregano

Oregano is native to northern Europe though it grows throughout the world.

To the ancient Greeks and Romans oregano was a symbol of joy and happiness

and has long been recognized for its aromatic properties. In one study oregano

showed the highest antioxidant activity among 27 different culinary and 12

medicinal herbs – more than many fruits and vegetables! Oregano's volatile oils can inhibit the growth of various bacteria and other microbes including salmonella, *E. coli*, and two different strains of staphylococcus. Oregano is also a good

source of dietary fiber, iron, manganese, calcium, vitamins A and C as well as some omega-3 fatty acids.

Thyme

Thyme is native to Asia, southern Europe and the Mediterranean region and is also cultivated in North America. Thyme was used by ancient Egyptians to preserve deceased pharaohs and burned for its aromatic qualities in ancient Greek temples. Thyme has a long history of use as a culinary, aromatic and medicinal herb. In natural medicine thyme is used for respiratory problems including coughs, bronchitis and chest congestion. Thymol is a potent volatile oil in thyme that protects healthy fats found in cells throughout the body and flavanoids found in thyme exert antioxidant effects. As with many other herbs, the natural oils in thyme show antimicrobial activity against a number of different bacteria and fungi and the oil of thyme in solution can destroy illness-causing bacteria. Thyme is an excellent source of iron, vitamin K, and manganese, a very good source of calcium and a food source of dietary fiber.

Fresh Herb Recipes

Fresh Herb & Lemon Vinaigrette

3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
_ cup extra virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon fresh dill
1 tablespoon fresh lemon thyme
1 tablespoon fresh oregano
Freshly ground salt and pepper (to taste)
_ teaspoon local honey

Fresh Mint & Almond Pesto

4 handfuls fresh mint (washed, drained well)
1 clove fresh garlic, pressed
5-6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
_ cup almonds
*Variations – _ cup grated Parmesan cheese
or _ cup pureed roasted red pepper*