

Use fresh herbs to bring out the flavor of foods

BY MELANIE POLK
SPECIAL WRITER

When health experts recommend that we eat more plant foods, they don't mean just fruits, vegetables and grains. Herbs are also an important source of phytochemicals, those substances in plants that are not vitamins or minerals, but possess a wealth of health-protective benefits.

Herbs have always been prized for a variety of healing properties, and in recent years cancer prevention has been added to the list of potential benefits. The compounds that produce flavor in rosemary and sage, for example, possess strong antioxidants which help fight cancer.

Chives, along with garlic and onions, belong to the Allium family and are rich in sulfides and other cancer-protective substances. Using herbs to bring out the flavor in recipes is also a great way to reduce your use of fat for flavoring.

When purchasing fresh herbs, look for unblemished leaves and avoid those that are wilted, bruised or discolored. Store sturdy herbs like rosemary, thyme, sorrel, marjoram or sage wrapped in paper towels inside a plastic bag in the refrigerator.

More delicate herbs, including basil, chervil, tarragon or mint,

CRACKED WHEAT AND BASIL PILAF

- 1 cup cracked wheat or bulgur
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 1/2 cups thinly sliced mushrooms
- 1 large tomato, seeded and diced, or 1 Tbs. each tomato puree and water
- 8 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- 4 tablespoons sliced almonds

1/2 teaspoon salt
Freshly ground pepper to taste

Prepare cracked wheat or bulgur according to package directions.

In heavy frying pan, heat oil. Add onion and cook, stirring, over medium heat until tender. Stir in garlic and mushrooms and cook until mushrooms are tender, about 2 minutes.

Stir in tomato, cracked wheat, basil, almonds, salt, and pepper to taste; stir until mixed and heated through.

Nutrition information: Each of the 6 servings contains 172 calories and 6 grams of fat.

can be stored in the refrigerator in a glass of water, stems down like flowers to keep them a little longer.

In cooking, use two to three times the quantity of fresh herbs when substituting for dried herbs, since their flavor is much more subtle. Most cooking calls for herb leaves, but cut stems usually have the strongest flavor. Robust herbs retain their flavor even if cooked for a long time, but fine herbs should be added to dishes just before serving.

Basil's mildly peppery flavor is delicious in tomato sauces, salad dressings or grains. Chervil's part-anise, part-parsley taste makes a delicious addition to cottage cheese or green beans. The mild, sweet onion taste of chives is perfect for salads or potatoes. Fennel's flavor is a nutty anise/celery blend that is excellent in soups, salads and breads. Marjoram, with a mild oregano taste, can be used with lamb, eggplant or squash. Mint is a cool, sweet addition to tea, yogurt, fruit, carrots or



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Savory side dish: Cracked wheat and basil pilaf is a delicious way to enjoy basil.

peas, while sage's lemony zest is pleasant in breads, potatoes and pork dishes. Sorrel also has a

lemony taste that complements spinach, cabbage and fish.

Melanie Polk is Director of Nutrition Education for the American Institute for Cancer Research.

Here are some tips from the American Heart Association

(AP) — Here are some tips from the American Heart Association's "The Low-Fat, Low-Cholesterol Cookbook" (Times Books, \$25) the revised, updated second edition of the collection of recipes and advice:

■ **Leftover fresh herbs:** Small amounts of fresh herbs, such as basil, oregano, cilantro, or a mixture of any of these, are the basis of easy herb cream cheese or herb margarine spread.

■ **Mix 2 tablespoons of chopped fresh herbs with 1 minced clove of garlic or 1/2 teaspoon bottled minced garlic and 8 ounces of nonfat or low-fat cream cheese or light margarine.**

■ **In general, whole spices and herbs will keep for about one year, though some may retain their flavor for as long as three to four years. Ground spices will keep for six months to two years.**

Try a little herb cream cheese on a bagel or a dollop of herb margarine on a baked potato. You'll find lots of uses for these treats.

■ **Dried herbs and spices:** Always store herbs and spices in airtight containers (glass jars recommended) away from heat and light.

In general, whole spices and

herbs will keep for about one year, though some may retain their flavor for as long as three to four years. Ground spices will keep for six months to two years.

When the aroma becomes faint, use more of the spices and herbs to compensate for flavor loss.

■ **Acidic foods:** Vinegar and other acidic foods can react with aluminum, untreated carbon steel and cast iron, possibly causing the food to taste metallic and the pot or pan to discolor.

■ **Dry-roasting nuts:** Stretch a few nuts into a lot of flavor by dry-roasting them. Heat nuts in an ungreased skillet over medi-

um heat, stirring frequently, for 1 to 5 minutes, or until golden brown.

Another method is to place nuts on a baking sheet and roast them in a 350 F oven for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

If you prepare extra to freeze, you'll have a ready supply for

future use.

■ **Roasted garlic:** Add roasted and peeled garlic cloves to your favorite spaghetti sauce or stew, mashed potatoes or cold pasta salad.

Puree roasted and peeled garlic and brush on toast, corn-on-the-cob, or pizza dough before you add the sauce and toppings.

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