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For Better Living
Healthy Cooking with Herbs

Cooking with herbs is a quick way to transform ordinary meals into extraordinary meals. In addition to helping flavor foods when cutting back on salt, fat and sugar, herbs may offer additional benefits of their own. Researchers are finding many culinary herbs (both fresh and dried) have antioxidants that may help protect against such diseases as cancer and heart disease.

If you've always thought you'd like to plant an herb garden, now is a good time to start one. Horticulturists recommend planting herbs after the last day of frost in the spring to avoid losing plants to a late freeze.

Substituting Fresh Herbs for Dried Herbs

A general guideline when using fresh herbs in a recipe is to use 3 times as much as you would use of a dried herb. When substituting, you'll often be more successful substituting fresh herbs for dried herbs, rather than the other way around.

When to Pick or Purchase Herbs

Purchase herbs close to the time you plan to use them. When growing herbs in your own garden the ideal time for picking is in the morning after the dew has dried but before the sun gets hot. This helps you get the best flavor and storage quality.

Storing Herbs

Fresh herbs can be stored in an open or a perforated plastic bag in your refrigerator crisper drawer for a few days. If you don't have access to commercial perforated bags, use a sharp object to make several small holes in a regular plastic bag.

To extend the freshness of herbs, snip off the ends of the stems diagonally. Place herbs in a tall glass with an inch of water, like cut flowers. Cover them loosely with a plastic bag to allow for air circulation. Place them in the refrigerator and change the water daily. Herbs may last a week or more stored this way. NOTE: The flavor of herbs may diminish the longer they're stored.

How to Wash Herbs

Wash herbs when you are ready to use them. Wash smaller amounts of herbs thoroughly under running water. Shake off moisture or spin dry in a salad spinner. Pat off any remaining moisture with clean paper towels.

If you're washing a larger amount of herbs at one time, treat them as you would salad greens. Place in a clean sink or deep bowl filled with cold water and swish around. Lift from the water and transfer to another bowl so dirt and grit remain in the water. Pour out the water and repeat the washing process in clean water until dirt and grit are gone and the water is clear.

Preparing Herbs for Cooking

For most recipes, unless otherwise directed, mince herbs into tiny pieces. Chop with a chef's knife on a cutting board or snip with a kitchen scissors. To speed cutting with a scissors, cut herbs coarsely into a small bowl or cup and snip back and forth with your scissors. Some recipes may direct you to cut large leaves, such as basil, into thin strips. An easy way to do this is to stack several leaves (about 3 to 5), roll into a tight roll, then cut into thin (1/16 to 1/8 inch) strips

with a sharp knife.

While some recipes call for a sprig or sprigs of herbs, normally the part of the herb you harvest will be the leaves. For herbs with sturdier stems, such as marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage and thyme, you can strip off the leaves by running your fingers down the stem from top to bottom. With small-leaved plants such as thyme, you can use both leaves and stems for cooking early in the season. Later in the season, as the stems become tougher, use just the leaves. For herbs with tender stems, such as parsley and cilantro, it's OK if you snip some of the stem in with the leaves when you're cutting these herbs.

When to Add Herbs During Food Preparation

Unlike dried herbs, fresh herbs are usually added toward the end in cooked dishes to preserve their flavor. Add the more delicate herbs -- basil, chives, cilantro, dill leaves, parsley, marjoram and mint -- a minute or two before the end of cooking or sprinkle them on the food before it's served. The less delicate herbs, such as dill seeds, oregano, rosemary, tarragon and thyme, can be added about the last 20 minutes of cooking. Obviously, for some foods, such as breads, batters, etc., you'll need to add herbs at the beginning of the cooking process.

Fresh herbs can be added to refrigerated cold foods several hours before serving. Allowing time (at least a couple of hours, if possible) for cold foods with herbs to chill helps the flavors to blend.

Source: University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension

Strawberry Smoothie

1 cup unsweetened frozen or fresh strawberries
1 teaspoon coarsely chopped mint leaves
1/2 cup 100% orange juice
1/2 cup low-fat vanilla yogurt

Place the strawberries, mint leaves, orange juice and yogurt in your blender jar. Whiz until thick and smooth.

Savory Green Beans

3/4 cup chopped sweet red pepper
1 garlic clove, minced
1 tablespoon canola oil
1 1/2 pounds fresh green beans, trimmed and cut into 2 inch pieces
1/2 cup water
2 tablespoons minced fresh savory (or 2 teaspoons dried)
1 tablespoon minced chives
1/2 teaspoon salt

In a large skillet, saute red pepper and garlic in oil for 2-3 minutes or until tender. Add the green beans, water, savory, chives and salt. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat. Cover and simmer for 8 - 10 minutes or until beans are crisp-tender.