

Herbs and Spices are Plant Foods Too!

Eating more plant foods is always a good idea. When most people think about plant foods, they think about leafy greens and getting their vegetables in or they think of ripe, juicy fruits with their wonderful natural sweetness. Of course, fruits and vegetables and especially raw vegetables in salads are fabulous choices for increasing consumption of plant chemicals (phytochemicals); however, there is another way. Herbs and spices are plant foods! Yes, indeed, they offer a wide spectrum of phytochemicals and infinite possibilities for flavor and textural combinations in cooking.

Not only are herbs and spices delicious, they can fill the nutrition gap for many people. For example, they can be of use to people who do not cook often enough to keep a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables on hand. Also, people with limited resources either in access to fresh plant foods or inadequate funds to purchase bunches of fresh greens on a weekly basis may be well served to have a cadre of spices on deck to add to anything they eat. Purchasing one dried herb or spice per week can be an affordable way to enhance your culinary collection.

Let us take a look at some of the most popular spices used in the United States and what is healthful about them. Pepper, or piper nigrum, is the most common spice used

worldwide. Piperine is the bioactive component, which also enhances the bioactive effects of curcumin found in turmeric when they are consumed together. Pepper may enhance digestive function, has nervous system benefits, contains antioxidants and has both anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial properties.¹ You can sprinkle pepper on almost all savory foods served at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The next most common spice used world wide is cinnamon, which can be used for flavoring, preservation, medicine and as an embalming agent! Cinnamon can help to regulate glucose, improve blood cholesterol and lower blood pressure. It contains anti-oxidants and possesses anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial properties. Some of the active chemicals found in cinnamon are cinnamaldehyde, eugenol, cinnamyl alcohol, coumarin, phenolic acids and terpenes.² Cinnamon is commonly used in the US in sweet preparations, but worldwide you can find cinnamon in savory dishes such as in the Middle East where it is used to flavor meat stews.

Clove comes in third in terms of usage. Cloves are prepared from the dried, unripe flower buds of evergreen trees. Clove, like cinnamon, can be used in sweet or savory. A few examples include — studding a ham, in stewed fruits, curries, pies, salads, spiced alcoholic beverages and in a typical Caribbean Jerk Marinade or Rub. Clove is highly anti-microbial, which is why it is one of the ingredients in mouthwashes! Clove oil is also used for coughs, colds, diarrhea, digestive disorders, diabetes, toothaches, memory loss and arthritis.³ The active chemicals are found in the volatile oil portion, which can also be purchased as an essential oil.

Another popular spice is cumin, which is a dried seed that can be eaten whole or ground. The cumin plant is a member of the parsley family and ground cumin is a key component of chili powder and curry powder.⁴ If you decide to try cumin for the first time, I am sure that some of you will readily identify its taste. Black seed/black cumin/nigella sativa is a type of cumin that is used in the Middle East.

Ginger is a rhizome that is grown in tropical regions. If you purchase it whole and fresh, select one that is not dried out in appearance. Ginger can be used whole, dried and ground, or processed into a syrup or an oil. Ginger is used in beverages, curry powder, confections, soups, jams and baked goods. It also can be used in sweet or savory foods. It is said to help aid arthritis, stomach upset, sea sickness, asthma, morning sickness, diabetes and menstrual irregularities.⁵

The last herb to be included in this month's column is



rosemary. Originally cultivated in the Mediterranean region it is now grown everywhere. In fact, it is one of the easiest herbs to grow in an herb garden. Rosemary is used in teas, meats, marinades, soups, beverages, stews, casseroles, fish, potatoes, salads, pasta and bread. The health benefits from rosemary are as an anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory and potentially for neuroprotection.⁶

So, the next time you are feeling like you need to eat more plants, consider what you read here! Eat some curry, add a bit of cinnamon and clove to your oatmeal, add rosemary to a marinade, make some ginger-snaps or just sprinkle a bit more pepper than usual. Feel confident that these small but mighty ingredients will go a long way toward improving your health!

If you are struggling to find a recipe — head over to www.drdeenutrition.com/more and check out my recipe of the month. €



Denise Pickett-Bernard PhD, RDN, LDN, IFNCP is a functional and integrative nutritionist who has developed university and graduate level curricula in culinary nutrition and integrative and functional clinical nutrition. Considered an expert in culinary nutrition and food-based interventions, she maintains a private practice in Roswell, GA where she helps clients reach vibrancy and flourishing using mindful food-based interventions. She leads the Culinary Collaborative with the Integrative and Functional Nutrition Academy. Her most recent endeavor is to produce a rehydration beverage www.RevitalizePro.com. Having practiced as a Reiki Master for over 15 years, Energy Medicine influences all of her professional initiatives. www.DrDeeNutrition.com

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Exotic Marinade for Beef, Pork or Chicken

Recipe by Denise Pickett-Bernard PhD, RDN, LDN

INGREDIENTS

For 1 pound of meat (4 small servings)

- ½ cup citrus juice (lime tastes the best)
- 1 ½ teas crushed dried rosemary
- 1 ½ teas ground ginger
- 1 teas black pepper
- ½ teas cayenne pepper
- 1 clove minced garlic

DIRECTIONS

- Mix all marinade ingredients.
- Add 1 pound of meat to a Ziplock bag.
- Add marinade, seal the bag, massage.
- Marinate overnight or at least an hour.

