

Florida Food Fare

by Mary King
Family & Consumer Sciences
University of Florida / IFAS
Sarasota County Extension



Basil

Description: Called the "royal herb" by ancient Greeks, this sun-loving annual is a member of the mint family. There are more than twelve varieties of basil that are cultivated for culinary use. Sweet Basil, *Ocimum basilicum*, and its close relative, Genoa Basil, *Genova profumatissima*, are the most familiar varieties. Both produce fragrant, broad, deep green leaves in abundance. Their pungent flavor is sometimes described as a cross between licorice and cloves. Other varieties of basil range in color from richly ruffled purple to pale mossy green. Each one has a distinctive taste, with its name revealing the underlying tones: Lemon Basil, Cinnamon Basil, and Persian Anise Basil. Even their tiny flowers, which appear on spikes that tower above the plants, are edible. Depending on the type, flowers are either white, pale pink or lavender. The flavor of the flower is milder, but similar to the leaves of the plant. Basil plants are abundant producers and often grow to heights of 15 to 24 inches.

Availability: In Florida, basil can be sown directly in the ground in a sunny location and will produce year round, once established. Continuous picking will prolong the life of the plant, but it is sensitive to frost and drought. Basil also does well as a container plant. Fresh basil is available year round in the supermarket. It can also be purchased dried, though it bears little resemblance in either flavor or aroma to the fresh herb.

Storage: Fresh basil can be wrapped in barely damp paper towels, in a plastic bag and refrigerated for up to 4 days. Or store a bunch of basil, stems down, in a glass of water with a plastic bag over the leaves for up to a week, changing the water every 2 days. To preserve fresh basil, wash and dry the leaves and place layers of leaves, then coarse salt in a container; then cover with a layer of virgin olive oil and tightly seal. Another method of preserving is to puree the leaves with a bit of water or oil. Portion this into ice cube trays and freeze. When solidly

frozen, store in the freezer in a zip lock bag. Basil has a high moisture content and will mold if not dried quickly.

Uses: Basil's robust, spicy flavor makes it a key herb in many kitchens. It is essential to Italian Pesto and many recipes using tomatoes, fish and vegetables. Basil is also used in making herb vinegar and potpourris. Basil is also used to relieve sore gums. Swish out the mouth with a tea made from 8 basil leaves in a cup of boiling water

Recipes:

Pesto Sauce

1/2 cup fresh basil leaves 1/2 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese
1/2 cup pine nuts 1/2 cup olive oil
2 cloves garlic Salt to taste

Put basil, pine nuts and garlic in a small food processor and blend. Add parmesan cheese, blend again. Add olive oil a little at a time until pesto is a creamy consistency. Add salt to taste. Serve on pasta. The pesto is never heated but be sure the pasta is served hot and buttered. Mix 2 tablespoons pesto with the pasta, and also add an extra spoonful on each serving. Makes enough for a one pound box of pasta.

Marigold and Mint Potpourri

1 cup dried marigold flowers 3/4 cup leaf basil
1 cup leaf thyme 1 cup coarse salt
1 1/4 cup whole peppermint leaves

Blend herbs and salt carefully, being careful not to crush herbs. Mix in marigolds. Let ripen in jars with tight fitting lids, away from light and heat for 4-6 weeks, then place in decorative jar with tight fitting lid. When ready to use, open jar, stir potpourri gently and leave the cover off for a while. Replace cover tightly when not in use. This will prolong the life of the fragrances.

Herb Vinegar

4 cups dry rosemary leaves 2 heads garlic, peeled
4 cups dry basil leaves 3 tablespoons crushed red pepper
30 stems marjoram, 6" long 1 gallon red wine vinegar

Put all ingredients except vinegar in a one gallon glass jar. Heat vinegar in a non-aluminum pot - but do not boil. Pour about half over the herb mixture. Crush herbs with a wooden spoon to release their flavor into the vinegar. Top off jar with remaining vinegar. Cover the glass jar with a non-metallic lid and store in a cool dry place for two weeks. Strain vinegar and pour into display bottles. Add sprigs of fresh herbs to each bottle if desired. Can be used on salads or vegetables or as part of a marinade for poultry or meat. They also make wonderful gifts.

Minestrone Soup

1/2 cup dry cannellini beans	3 stalks celery, diced
1/2 cup dry red kidney beans	1 medium bulb fennel, chopped
1/2 cup dry garbanzo beans	1/3 cup fresh basil, chopped
1/2 cup dry lentils	1/2 cup fresh oregano, chopped
1/4 cup dry split peas	1/4 cup parsley chopped
1 small white potato, peeled, diced	1/4 teaspoon dried rosemary, crushed
4 or 5 cups chicken or beef broth	1 tablespoon fennel seeds
2 packages frozen Italian Vegetables	1 tablespoon coarse salt
1/4 cup olive oil	1 teaspoon black pepper
1 large onion peeled, chopped	1 cup fresh tomatoes, diced
4 cloves garlic peeled, chopped	Cooked pasta or rice
1 medium red bell pepper, chopped	

Soak in water overnight and cover cannellini, kidney and garbanzo beans, lentils and peas. The next day, cook in 3 cups water for 20 minutes, skim foam from top but do not drain. Simmer potatoes in 1 cup broth for 15 minutes, do not drain. In an 8-quart pot heat olive oil over medium heat. Add onion, garlic, bell pepper, celery and fennel. Saute until onions are golden. Add basil, oregano, parsley, rosemary and fennel seed, salt and pepper. Add simmered beans, undrained potatoes and vegetables, broth and tomatoes. Simmer 1 hour, stirring occasionally. Add a little more broth if needed. Serve over rice or pasta.