

GROWING HERBS FOR THE HEALTH OF IT!

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Do your salivary glands kick into action when you think about a juicy hamburger or a salty snack? Do sugary treats draw you like metal to a magnet? Well then, you're human! Our desire for fat, salt, and sugary foods is the result of humans evolving over many millennia. Our bodies need fat, salt, and sugar to function—only we don't need as much as we are consuming. The latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend cutting down on fat, added sugars, and sodium (see box for specifics). Cutting back doesn't mean we need to take all the fun and flavor out of enjoying our favorite foods.

Luckily, there are ways to eat less salt, sugar, and fat without sacrificing flavor. Herbs are fragrant and flavorful plant leaves, seeds, and even stem parts that are low in calories and a good substitute for

the foods that may contribute to weight gain and other potentially harmful health effects (Duyff, 2006). Herbs contain essential oils that add flavor and nutrition to our food. To activate and release these oils, herbs can be gently crushed, cooked, or cut and added to a variety of dishes. Different herbs, and even varieties of the same herb, contain different essential oils, leading to variations in fragrance and flavor (Nickoll and O'Hara, 2010). Using herbs to reduce salt, sugar, and fat is easy – just start slow! By gradually cutting down and replacing salt, sugar, and fat with herbs, you can train your taste buds to prefer these foods over less healthy alternatives (Nutrition Action, 2015).

A great place to start is by making homemade salad dressings that feature fresh or dried herbs for flavor. Store-bought salad dressings are often high in calories and sodium. By making your own, you can choose to include some healthier alternatives. When adding herbs to salad dressings, it is best to start with a small amount and taste as you go – it's much easier to add herbs to your dressing than to remove them. For more information check out The Garden Kitchen's Buttermilk Ranch and Balsamic Vinaigrette recipes at the end of this article!

Herbs can also be used in cooked foods to add flavor. Heartier herbs, like thyme and oregano, hold up well to heat and can be added early in the cooking process. In fact, cooking helps to enhance the flavor of herbs and allows those flavors to meld with other ingredients. More delicate herbs, like basil and mint, should be added towards the end of cooking or as a garnish. Cooking causes

Some key recommendations from the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines:

- ▶ Consume less than 10 percent of calories per day from added sugars.
- ▶ Consume less than 10 percent of calories per day from saturated fats.
- ▶ Consume less than 2,300 milligrams (mg) per day of sodium.

the leaves of more delicate herbs to become damaged and wilted, taking away from their flavor and even making them bitter (Nutrition Action, 2015). Dried herbs can be used at any point in the cooking process, but for maximum flavor add at the beginning or middle of a recipe. Remember to proceed with caution: dried herbs are more concentrated in flavor than fresh herbs. So, reduce the quantity by about two-thirds when adding dried herbs in place of fresh herbs. Also try pairing herbs with roasted or steamed vegetables to enhance the flavor.

Water and unsweetened homemade iced tea infused with fresh herbs is a way to cut down on sugary beverages. Try adding chopped mint leaves to a quart of water or tea and letting it sit over night in the refrigerator. This makes a refreshing, thirst quenching drink for hot summer days. Other combinations are tasty as well such as cilantro and lime (for a half gallon of water add one cup chopped cilantro and a quarter wedge of lime). You can also use edible flowers such as hibiscus, rose, lavender, and citrus blossoms to make a cold tea, but make sure whatever you use is 100% pesticide free!

PLANT SELECTION

In addition to helping reduce dietary salt, sugar, and fat, herbs can provide some of their own health benefits. Most herbs contain antioxidants. Antioxidants are compounds that prevent oxidation in the body and may have protective effects against inflammation and some chronic illnesses (Antioxidants: Beyond the Hype, 2016). Studies have suggested that eating foods high in antioxidants, like herbs, help support the immune system by reducing inflammation and preventing “over-response,” which can damage cells (Antioxidants: Beyond the Hype, 2016). Phytonutrients, also called phytochemicals, are another class of plant compounds thought to have protective effects in the body. Phytonutrients work in various ways to protect plants from damage. You might think of them as “fighting” to defend against things that might harm the plant like germs and bugs. Those same nutrients may provide benefits to your body as well (Heneman and Zidenburg-Cher, 2008). It should be noted that protective health effects related to antioxidants and phytonutrients have not been proven, but researchers are generally in agreement that eating foods high in these compounds, like herbs, is beneficial for health (Antioxidants: Beyond the Hype, 2016).



DECIDING WHAT TO PLANT IN YOUR SUMMER GARDEN AND HOW TO PLANT IT:



► BASIL

There are many different varieties of basil, most of which grow well in southern Arizona in the summertime, due to our Mediterranean-like climate. Genovese, commonly known as Italian or sweet basil, has large broad leaves with a slightly sweet taste. Thai basil has more of an anise flavor and can sustain higher cooking temperatures than sweet basil. It has small, pointed leaves with a purple tinted stem and purple clusters of flowers. Lemon basil has a wonderful citrus aroma and a delicate lemon flavor. Though less hardy than sweet and Thai basil, it is worth the effort in a summer garden for its bright flavor. During our Arizona summer you might consider planting the following varieties as well: holy basil, cinnamon basil, red or purple basil, and bush basil. The most flavorful leaves come from tender stemmed basil plants that have not produced flowers (Brenzell, 2012). Basil is particularly successful during our summers because it grows well in full sun: there is no need to shade these plants. Grow basil from seed in fertile, well-draining soil. Water until the soil is damp, usually every day in midsummer and less often in the spring and fall. Basil can be successfully planted with night shade plants, particularly sweet peppers and tomatoes. Check out this link for more information on companion planting: <https://cals.arizona.edu/cochise/mg/best-friends-brief-guide-companion-planting-part-1>



► MINT

Consider growing a few different kinds of mint to capitalize on the culinary uses of this hardy plant. The most widely grown type of mint is spearmint, which has saw-toothed leaves and produces purple flowers that attract pollinators (Biggs, McVicar, and Flowerdew). Chocolate mint is a variety of peppermint (Brenzell, 2012) that has smaller, dark green leaves. It makes an excellent addition to fresh fruit or water on hot summer days. In addition, apple mint, pineapple mint, and orange mint all grow well in Southern Arizona. Mint can spread quickly and take over other planted areas, so be sure to keep it in a container or in an area that allows it to grow far and wide. This herb does best in medium rich soil, in partial shade or full sun and will disappear in the winter, but is likely to come back seasonally for three years. Mint can be started from runners if you wish to start additional plants (Brenzell, 2012).



► THYME

Thyme can be grown for ground cover as well as used for culinary purposes. Common thyme, also known as garden or English thyme, produces small oval green leaves and small white flowers. This type of thyme lends a beautiful earthy flavor to soups, sauces, and roasted dishes. When using this herb, be cautious in its application: a little goes a long way. Lemon thyme grows taller than common thyme and can be green and yellow or silver (Brenzell, 2012). Lemon thyme adds a nice citrus note to any dish that would benefit from lemon juice or zest. Thyme grows well in the summer, in light, well-drained soil and in partial shade in the hottest months. Instead of trying to grow thyme from seed, try starting from cuttings (Brenzell, 2012). Water until the soil is damp, usually every day in midsummer, less often in the spring and fall.



▶ OTHER HERBS OF INTEREST

Other herbs that grow well in our summer gardens include summer savory, which can be grown in full sun in light, well-drained soil (Brenzell, 2012). This herb produces narrow, tougher leaves that should be chopped fine before adding to dishes. It has a piney, spicy citrus flavor. Also consider the many different varieties of marjoram that range from slightly spicy to sweet (Brenzell, 2012). The variety most often found in this area is sweet or common marjoram (Bateman, Berton, and Doig, 2008). A softer leaved herb, marjoram is often used to spice Italian and grilled dishes. Grow it in partial shade during the heat of the summer in light, well-drained soil. Oregano also has many varieties that grow well in the summer such as Mexican or Greek oregano, which require well-drained soil in full sun.

STORAGE AND PRESERVATION

Fresh herbs should be treated like cut flowers. To store them, submerge the end of stems in water and wrap the leaves in plastic wrap. Or you can wrap fresh herbs in a damp cloth and plastic wrap to preserve them. Storing fresh herbs this way reduces the amount of water lost to evaporation while stored in the refrigerator, helping to extend their shelf life.

Dried herbs begin to lose flavor almost immediately, so store them in a cool, dark, and dry place to prevent degradation. It is a good idea to label any dried herbs with the date purchased. It is best to keep dried herbs stored for no more than a year (Duyff, 2006). Not sure if your dried herbs are still good? Pour a small amount into your hand, crush lightly, and smell – if it smells musty or stale, don't use them.

For more information about growing and using herbs, visit www.thegardenkitchen.org.

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del jardín a la cocina

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