

Title:

All About Basil

Word Count:

576

Summary:

Basil is one of the most popular herbs in use today. This article gives information on where and how it's used, and how to grow and preserve it.

Keywords:

basil,herbs.cooking,food

Article Body:

Basil is one of the most popular herbs used in cooking today. It is a very versatile herb, and is used in Italian, Thai and Vietnamese cuisines amongst many others.

It has a warm, aromatic but gentle flavor, with a hint of spicey aniseed. It's well known that it goes extremely well with tomatoes, where it can be served raw in salads such as the classic Italian Caprese, or cooked into a rich tomato sauce for pasta or other hot dishes.

Basil is also popular as the prime ingredient of pesto sauce (known as pistou in France), which is made by pounding fresh basil leaves with pine kernals, olive oil, parmesan cheese and garlic to produce the distinctive thick green sauce so often used with spaghetti or as a dipping condiment.

Like most herbs, basil is widely available in both fresh and dried forms. Again like most herbs, the fresh version is generally considered to be superior. If you come across a cheap and bountiful supply of the fresh herb, you can dry it slowly in a very low oven before crumbling it and storing in airtight jars. This method of preserving it costs much in terms of flavour though, and a better option is to puree the leaves and freeze into ice cubes, which can then be dropped from frozen straight into the recipe you're cooking.

Basil can be quite expensive to buy in the fresh form, so if you become a fan of the herb you might like to try growing it yourself - it's much cheaper that way, and you can also ensure that the leaves you're using will be as fresh as can be! It's also one of the easier herbs to grow and so is ideal for beginners.

Basil is a native of warm climates, and so needs to be planted in a sunny and

sheltered spot if it is to flourish. If you have a patio or terrace with a south facing wall, then sowing it in a pot there is ideal. It's all the better too if you can grow it close to your kitchen for easy picking whenever you need it!

Left to itself, basil will tend to grow into a tall, thin, ungenerous-looking plant with little in the way of edible leaves. You can encourage a more rewardingly bushy growth by 'pinching out' the plant as it grows, removing the top young leaves to encourage more sideways growth. Harvesting the herb regularly will also encourage more vigorous growth.

Basil is a tender annual, and will die off quickly in cold weather. You may be able to prolong its life by bringing it indoors at the first sign of a cold snap, or you could sow a succession of new plants indoors for a year-round supply.

Although it is mainly a culinary herb, basil does have some minor antiseptic properties, but is not widely used medicinally by herbalists. It is however a member of the wider mint herb family, and in common with its relatives it's said to be a good digestive aid.

There are many varieties of basil available, but the most popular are the Genovese type which gives the typical authentic italian flavour and aroma, and the purple-leaved 'holy' basil which is used more often in Asian cooking.

Whichever variety you choose, and whether you decide to buy it or grow it, basil is a treat for your senses and a great addition to your culinary toolbox.