

Basil

I. What is it?

A. A tender low growing herb

1. Basil grows between 30 and 130 cm tall.
2. It has light green, silky leaves. Some leaves may have tints of red or purple.
3. These leaves are round and pointed, and are used as the herb, can be used fresh or dried
4. The plant also has small, white flowers arranged in a spike
5. Basil is very sensitive to cold and grows best in hot, dry conditions.

B. Has a strong, pungent, sweet smell and flavor

C. Basil is a member of the mint family

D. There are over 60 different varieties of basil. They all have a different appearance and taste. The one that most people are familiar with is sweet basil.

II. History of Basil

A. Basil first began in India and spread because of the spice routes of ancient times. It was mainly used for its aroma and not for its flavoring in food.

B. It first spread to Egypt where it was used as an embalming and preserving herb in mummies

C. Then it kept spreading through the trade routes.

D. In 1629, basil came to America through the Massachusetts Bay Colony and spread throughout our country.

E. It is now one of the most popular herbs in America.

III. Health Benefits of Basil

A. Basil contains two water soluble flavonoids, beneficial compounds found in plants: orientin and vicenin. These compounds protect your cells and chromosomes from damage.

- B. Basil contains volatile oils in its leaves that help protect against unwanted bacterial growth, many of these bacteria that it protects against have become resistant to antibiotics, like certain strains of E. coli and Staph.
- C. A specific compound found in the oil of basil is called Eugenol, which provides anti-inflammatory effect by blocking a certain enzyme. Aspirin and ibuprofen work to block that same enzyme. So basil can provide relief from arthritis and inflammatory bowel conditions.
- D. Basil contains beta-carotene, which is an antioxidant that helps to fight free radicals (by products of every day living) and protects the lining of numerous body structures. Free radical damage is also a contributing factor to many conditions including asthma, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and cancer.
- E. Basil also contains magnesium which promotes cardiovascular health by prompting muscles and blood vessels to relax and thus improving blood flow. This also helps to reduce the risk of irregular heart rhythms
- F. Basil contains vitamin k. Vitamin k helps your blood to clot normally and also helps to protect your bones from fracture. Using usual amounts of basil in cooking would not affect effectiveness of blood thinning medication.
- G. Basil is also a source of iron, calcium, potassium, and vitamin c.

IV. Fun Facts of Basil

- A. The name basil is derived from an old Greek word that means “royal” and it was incorporated into perfumes especially for the kings.
- B. When it arrived in Greece, a legend broke out that basil was the cure for a bite of the dragon-like creature known as basilisk, and that if anyone looked into the eyes of the basilisk they would instantly die.
- C. The Romans thought that basil would only be effective if it were planted while the sower was cursing. To this day the French term for planting basil means “rant and rave”

- D. Basil is associated with the Hindu God and Hindus hold the herb sacred and ask for forgiveness when they touch it.
- E. In Romania if a boy accepts a sprig of basil from a girl, he is engaged to marry her. (heck of a lot cheaper than a ring 😊)
- F. Basil was said to have been found growing around the tomb of Jesus.
- G. Basil essential oil has been used to treat skin problems like acne, used as an anti-vomiting agent in motion sickness, and used in aromatherapy as a calming effect, especially for people with migraines and depression.
- H. Basil tea has been used around the world to treat constipation, stomach cramps, and indigestion
- I. Basil is used in perfumes and incense because of its rich aroma.

V. A few tips

- A. Since the oils in basil are highly volatile, it is best to add the herb near the end of the cooking process so it will retain its maximum essence and flavor.
- B. Whenever possible choose fresh basil over the dried herb for superior flavor.
- C. When you buy fresh basil the leaves should be vibrant and should be free from dark spots or yellowing.
- D. Fresh basil should be stored in the refrigerator wrapped in a slightly damp paper towel for around 4 days. It may also be frozen either chopped or whole in an airtight container. Frozen basil should be used within 4 months. Dried basil should be kept in a tightly sealed glass container in a cool, dark, dry place where it will keep fresh for about six months.
- E. Basil pairs very nicely with tomatoes, which we learned about last month. It also pairs nicely with onions, garlic, and olives.
- F. Oregano pairs well with basil. Most other herbs tend to overpower the flavor and aroma of basil.

VI. How to grow basil

- A. Basil can be planted directly into the ground from seed. Be sure to plant after the danger of frost has passed.
- B. Basil can be grown indoors in a pot if put on a windowsill. Make sure if you do this to trim the basil plant often because it can become gnarly.
- C. Basil plants are very tender especially in the early stages of growth. They like a lot of sun.
- D. Take leaves off as needed once your basil plant has grown and add them to soups, sauce, or even save them for later.

VII. Activity

- A. Taste, smell, and identify fresh basil compared to other fresh herbs
- B. Learn how to grow your own basil
- C. Cooking demo