

## Spice Up Your Summer

Can you imagine plucking the stigmas from saffron crocuses by the tens of thousands just to get a supply of a spice for cooking? Saffron is one herb you may have to keep in your safety deposit box, not in the kitchen drawer. Saffron has been gathered by hand for thousands of years for use as medicine, perfume, dyes, and food flavoring.

It is the dried red stigmas of *Crocus sativus* L, a member of the iris family. As there are nearly a quarter of a million stigmas in a pound, it is rare and costly. Today it is acknowledged as a medicine, justifying the claims of folklore. According to recent scientific journals it has been found to be effective against liver cancer and possibly lung cancer as well as showing some effectiveness in managing depression. There was no mention of quantities but if the dose exceeded the wee smidgen used in cooking, it would surely be cause for greater depression.

Historically, herbs were so important that nations fought over them. In addition, some places, the Spice Islands, for example, were named for them. Today, as people are trying to avoid over-processed food in the effort to eat a healthy diet, herbs and spices have been recruited to fill the gap left when salt, sugars, and fats are reduced. If you have a garden or even if you have a friend with a garden, you know that just picked food can stand alone: its just-picked taste needs no help!

As summer fades to autumn it is time to scout out those herbs that add dimension to daily menus. One thing about herbs and spices that we overlook is the timing of their use. The universal presence of pepper on the stove can make its use unconscious. Pepper is best when freshly ground and should not be added before cooking as it becomes hot tasting if it sits in cooked food. It is an add-on, like salt, the automatic addition of which can become a habit, a bad habit. Most recipes will tell us the best time spices and herbs should be included.

Bay leaves from *Laurus nobilis* add fragrance to stews, tomato dishes, turkey dressing. The shrub can attain a height of ten to twenty feet I've read but I have had a potted bay laurel for years and it is only a foot high. It will never make a hedge. I dry a few leaves from time to time and since it may die back in a severe winter, I put the pot under a holly tree and cover it loosely with leaves. Most of the herbs you grow can be dried in oven or microwave, but they also dry adequately folded into a paper towel and left on the kitchen counter.

Not all condiments need be measured out from little jars and tins, but can be grown on windowsills if the pot is deep enough. Basil, parsley and chives are perfect for windowsills. An herb garden is a favored place for oregano, marjoram, savory, rosemary and thyme and of course a proper vegetable garden provides space for garlic and onions.

Lemon thyme makes a charming green and yellow ground cover. Coriander, like basil, is so much better fresh, it is worth finding seeds or a plant. The pretty lacy flowers also attract a tiny wasp that feeds on aphids. Parsley needs elbow room so is happy outside in a pot, a deep one. Cut a few stems, put them in a vase of water on the table, lay the scissors nearby and you

can add flavorful snips to everything for days. The flat leafed kind is the liveliest and despite the small amounts you eat is it very good for you, with lots of vitamin K.

Even if basil is easily found dried, the fresh is so much better: it is worth growing. It is also beautiful in a border: *Ocimum basilicum* 'Purpurascens' is welcomed for its foliage by gardeners who would never think to eat it. Some herbs are shrubs. Rosemary can attain considerable size and lemon verbena, *Aloysia triphylla* is a slender-twiggled shrub that can reach ten feet but has to be brought in from the cold or grown as an annual.

Some edibles boast lovely flowers. Paths can be edged with low-growing *Allium schoenoprasum*, chives. It is long lived and greets each spring with lavender/pink balls atop slender stems. White daisies brighten *Chamaemelum nobile*, Roman chamomile, good to grow around patio stones or instead of a lawn in small spaces. The flowers are what Peter Rabbit's tea was brewed from.