

Culinary Herbs

By Alison Birks, MS, AHG, CNS

Fresh culinary herbs can play an important role in the diet as sources of potent antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and disease fighting phytochemicals. All aromatic herbs contain essential oils, which have many medicinal effects. Some important culinary herbs include: rosemary, oregano, thyme, sage, basil, parsley, cilantro and dill.

Rosemary has been studied for its anti-bacterial, anti-fungal and anti-tumor effects. The scent of rosemary oil lowers the stress hormone cortisol and induces a state of well-being. It contains flavanoids, polyphenols and other compounds that are being studied for prevention and treatment of dementia. No wonder this herb is known as the "herb of remembrance"! When applied topically, rosemary extract was shown to prevent skin photo-aging and sun damage. One study found that when used in cooking, rosemary protects plant sterols in olive oil from damaging oxidation. Rosemary may have similar benefits in humans, by protecting cholesterol. Since oxidized cholesterol is implicated in heart disease and atherosclerosis, it may be wise to use plenty of rosemary when cooking fatty and cholesterol-rich foods.

Oregano oil extracts are strongly anti-bacterial, antiviral and anti-fungal. Extracts of oregano oil are used both topically and internally to treat various infections of the skin, lungs and digestive tract. Thyme is a similar plant with strong anti-microbial properties. It has been used clinically as a treatment for acute bronchitis, cough and croup. Thyme tea with honey is a traditional cough and cold remedy, due to the anti-spasmodic and antiseptic constituent thymol. Both oregano and thyme infusions were also found to prevent the oxidation of low density lipoproteins (LDL) in vitro.

Sage is an herb with medicinal properties similar to oregano and thyme, but it is also a source of phyto-estrogens. Cold sage tea is used to treat night sweats and hot flashes of menopause. It is also a folk remedy for drying up breast milk during weaning. Sage tea is also a good antiseptic herb to use as a sore throat gargle and in mouth care. Sage is often added to herbal throat sprays for this purpose.

Sweet basil is a traditional remedy for headaches. Hot basil tea promotes sweating, alleviates menstrual cramps and settles the stomach. The herb contains eugenol, a potent insecticide. In one study, eugenol from basil was found to be as effective as the toxic chemical DEET as a tick repellent.

Parsley, cilantro and dill are botanically related plants used to increase urination. Parsley root is especially effective for this purpose. A handful of fresh parsley is high in calcium, beta carotene, folate, vitamin c, potassium, phosphorus, lutein and zeaxanthin. A hot compress of parsley leaves is used to help draw a boil to a head and is a remedy for a painful clogged milk duct. Dill seeds can be chewed to relieve gas, spasms and indigestion. Dill water or tea is used as an effective remedy for colic in babies. Fennel, anise and caraway seeds have similar properties.

To obtain the many benefits of fresh culinary herbs, use them liberally in salads and in cooking, especially when cooking with oils. Be sure to dry some of your herbs for use in medicinal teas during the winter months. Culinary herbs also keep well by freezing in ice cube trays. Look for concentrated sources of these special foods such as supercritical extracts, capsules, liquid extracts and essential oils in health food stores.

Alison Birks is a Nutritionist, and a registered herbalist, with the American Herbalists Guild. Alison is trained in traditional Chinese Herbology, Western Herbalism, Ayurveda and Aroma therapy. You can contact Alison at New Morning: 203 263-0673 ext. 355.