

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Too often when we get the bad news that our blood pressure is creeping up, the doctor says "Lay off the salt.", with no advice about how to make food taste good. This column has all ready discussed the value of increasing calcium, potassium and magnesium to help balance out the sodium and lower blood pressure. But still, how do we get food that tastes good without the salt we're so used to? Here are some hints about using more herbs for flavor.

It is true that highly salted foods are an acquired tasted. We can gradually reduce the amount of salt we use, until we enjoy the flavors without salt. But there are lots of herbs and spices we can use to add flavor without sodium. One flavoring that is neither herb nor spice but that really helps boost flavor without sodium is lemon juice. Adding a splash of lemon juice to many foods, from meats and stews to veggies and side dishes can add enough spark to the dish to cover less salt.

There are now many salt-free spice mixtures on the grocery shelves too. For years there was one brand and one flavor. Now there are combinations specially tailored for spicy, fish, grilling, beef, southwestern and many more, of many brands. Besides the dry spice mixtures, which can be used as a rub on meats, sprinkled over finished dishes or used in the cooking sauces, there are now various flavors of salt-free marinades for meats and fish, as well as liquid salad dressings that can double as marinades for meat or splashes for vegetables. Try sprinkling some of your favorite

salad dressing over cooked broccoli or cauliflower. Anything, as simple as Italian or as new as a raspberry walnut vinaigrette will add plenty of flavor with much less sodium.

When you think you're ready to try some individual herbs, where do you start? There are so many on the rack they can be intimidating. And they can cost so much! How do you pick one or two to start? Think about the flavors you know you like. If you like Italian, then start with basil or oregano. Marjoram is another very like oregano but more delicate taste. If you like Mexican, go for cumin and cilantro (also called coriander). Rosemary and bay leaves will add great flavor to almost any meat dish. All of these are strong herbs with bold flavors, so be light-handed until you've tried them.

Milder flavored herbs can be slipped into dishes for a more subtle flavor. Chervil has a rather licorice-like flavor that works great with vegetables. Dill of course reminds us of pickles, but is a real burst of flavor in both green salads and creamy macaroni or potato salad. Mint has many uses beyond mint tea. Chopped onto corn, tomatoes or green beans it adds a cool taste as well as refreshing aroma.

Of course there are dozens of others in the racks of spice bottles too. So, should you buy the fresh or the dried version? Start with the fresh. They cost less, you won't end up with a big bottle of something you don't like, and you'll get a brighter, fresher version of their true flavor. If the recipe you're looking at calls for dried herbs and you want to use fresh, double the amount. Dried herbs have a more concentrated flavor because all the water's been removed. And look for recipes that use just one or two herbs to start with. Too many will muddle the flavor and you won't be able to tell which you like and which you don't. If you find one you really like, you might be able to grow it in a small pot on the windowsill, for a steady supply!

If you'd like a list of which herbs work well with different vegetables and meats, call me and I'll send you one. In the meantime, here's a recipe that uses a classic Mediterranean herb combination. If you have a Greek or Italian seasoning mixture you can use that instead of the individual herbs.

Baked Greek Tomatoes

2 large ripe tomatoes	2 slices whole wheat bread
1 clove garlic, finely minced	1 tsp olive oil
1 tsp dried oregano	1/2 tsp dried basil
1/2 tsp dried thyme	salt, pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350° F. Wash tomatoes and slice in half. Use a spoon to scoop out the centers then set in small baking dish. Use a food processor or tear bread into small crumbs. Combine bread with all other ingredients in a small bowl, then divide into the 4 tomato cups. Bake 25 to 30 minutes, until tomatoes are soft but not mushy and topping is golden brown. Serves 4.

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