

PENNY SAVER NEWS

FAX: 932-5261

April 1 , 2010

BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**

5339 S. County Road 579

Seffner, FL 33584-3334

PH:(813)744-5519 x 136, FAX:744-5776
e-mail:mkeith@ufl.edu**No April Fooling for Strawberries**

After our oh-so-cold winter we are now into a fully glorious strawberry season. If you haven't had a bowlful of fresh ripe strawberries yet, get busy! They are super-sweet and gorgeously red this year, so enjoy them while the prices are so good. Before long there will only be out-of-state berries at out-of-sight prices in the stores.

Now that you are stuffed full of plain fresh berries, what else can you do with them? For starters, you can freeze some for later. If you think you'll use them within a month you can simply rinse and cap them before you freeze them. If you have the freezer space, set them on a cookie sheet, points up, and freeze. When they're solid slide them into a freezer bag and seal to store.

If you want to serve them whole, don't thaw them. Put them frozen into your fruit salad or onto the pie. They'll lose their shape and start to leak juices when they thaw so add them at the very last minute. For elegant and healthy treats just stick a toothpick in the frozen berries and eat them one at a time, savoring each luscious bite.

If you won't use them very soon then for best quality strawberries should be frozen with added sugar. You can mix granulated sugar into a bowl of cut berries or make a sugar syrup to pour over them in the freezer container. While the cold of freezing is what keeps the berries safe the sugar is what will best protect the color and the texture from the damage caused by air. The recommended amount of sugar for best quality is $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sugar for each 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of cut berries. Stir it into the berries and leave them sit for 15 minutes before you pack them. You can use less sugar if you

prefer, but the color and texture will suffer the longer they are frozen. Unfortunately sugar substitutes do not provide the same protection. They'll sweeten the flavor but the berries will still brown and fade more rapidly.

Berries frozen without sugar can be used like fresh berries for making jam or jelly too. Measure them and the sugar, as if they were fresh. If you add sugar to the berries before you freeze them, measure it exactly. Mark it on the container so you know how much is there. Then when you thaw the fruit, use that much less sugar than the pectin recipe calls for. You will need to use a liquid pectin, not the powdered kind, to make jam or jelly with presweetened fruit. If sugar is added before the powdered pectin, the pectin won't gel correctly and you're likely to have jars of strawberry syrup.

What can you do with your packs of frozen berries beside add them to mixed fruit salad? The old stand-by uses have long been as topping for ice cream or cheesecake. Yummy, not a problem there! If you are into baking, there are recipes for strawberry pie, muffins or bread, strawberry cake or cookies, even strawberry fudge. Strawberries baked into pancakes or poured as topping over waffles are sure to cheer up breakfast in your house. Check the cookbooks in your local library or go on-line to any of the recipe websites.

Other than just sweets, a lot of trendy recipes these days are mixing strawberries with jalapeño peppers and minced onions for strawberry salsa! Serve it with fish, chicken, even pork chops. Of course there are the strawberry mixed drinks like daiquiris, but not everyone needs alcohol to enjoy our berries.

With all of those options, have you thought of serving a Strawberry Fool? Super simple, *Fools* are old British desserts made of pureed fruit gently blended in to whipped

cream or sometimes a vanilla custard base. They are often served as elegant desserts in tall wine glasses. Any pretty dish or cup will hold the sweets but a clear glass shows off the gorgeous colors. If you want to avoid all the saturated fat in heavy cream, make a super simple low-cal version by substituting whipped topping. It won't be the same but it will be beautiful and delicious. Happy April Fools Day, no fooling with the berries!

Strawberry Fool

4 cups strawberries (about 2 12-oz containers) ½ cup sugar
1 Tbsp orange juice (or liqueur optional) 1 tsp lemon juice
1 ½ cups heavy cream (or 3 cups whipped topping, a 12-oz container)

Chill cream, bowl and beaters in refrigerator. Rinse berries, remove caps and cut in half. Mix with sugar, juice or liqueur and lemon juice. Let sit 20 minutes. Chop berries in food processor or blender, or mash with a fork. Set aside. Beat chilled cream in cold bowl until soft peaks form. Gently fold mashed berries into cream, leaving the mixture streaky. Spoon into 6 glasses or serving dishes. If not serving immediately chill for up to 1 hour. Garnish with more sliced berries, mint leaves or chocolate curls. Serves 6.

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