

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Cilantro - Love It! or Hate It?

As with many things in the world, there are 2 camps on cilantro. Either you love it, or you hate it. Those who hate it say it tastes as bad as stink bugs smell. They'll spit it right back out if they happen to get a bit in their mouths. Those who love it will add more to their recipes, and even make cilantro pesto. But rest assured, the lovers will not be able to convert the haters to their camp. It seems that which camp we find ourselves in was determined by our parents. It's a genetic thing!

Because cilantro is also known as Chinese parsley, you'd be right in guessing that the aromatic leaves are used a lot in Chinese food. But it is also commonly used in many parts of Asia and India as well as around the Mediterranean. It is native to Europe and Asia, and has been used for thousands of years in many countries. Cilantro seeds, also called coriander, were found in King Tut's tomb in Egypt!

Mexican culantro is a completely different plant that has a very similar though stronger flavor and aroma. In Puerto Rico it's known as recao. It was used in Central and South America for hundreds if not thousands of years. Now it is used in Southeast Asia, and cilantro is used across Mexico and the Americas. Culantro tolerates the heat better than cilantro, so if you're wanting to grow it here, look for the Mexican version.

Both plants contain a lot of different chemicals that contribute to the flavor and aroma. One group of chemicals carries the stinky, soapy, rank flavors. The scientific name for culantro is foetidum, or fetid, which means 'smelling extremely unpleasant'. Apparently the person who named it was not one of the lovers! Most people can taste and smell these chemicals.

But cilantro and culantro also have what are described as grassy, fresh and even citrusy flavors and odors. Those are good flavors that people like, and that add so much to our foods. Unfortunately, the people in the cilantro-haters camp can't taste them in cilantro. So all they get are the bad smells and flavor, none of the good ones. No wonder they don't like these herbs! The cilantro-lovers on the other hand get a balance of both the fresh and the soapy flavors.

Cilantro, like most other fresh green herbs and vegetables, has a lot of good ingredients. It has antioxidants and is antibacterial. So not only does it help protect us against chemical 'rust', it helps kill bacteria. It's a decent source of vitamin C and folate. It has both calcium and potassium, to help manage our blood pressure. And it has fiber. The trick is that to get significant amounts of any of these nutrients you would need to be eating it by the cupful. Not very many of us do that!

So, don't worry about eating it for the nutrition. If you enjoy the flavor, that's enough reason to add it to your dishes. If you can't stand the flavor, but like the stir-fries or other kinds of food that often call for cilantro, try adding parsley instead. It will provide a lot of the more pleasant fresh, grassy flavors without the soapy, stinky ones. Or grate a little bit of orange or lemon zest into the dishes. A few curls of orange rind topping the plate can add as much eye appeal as a few leaves of cilantro.

Or, if you really want more of the intended flavor, crush the cilantro 15 to 30 minutes before you need it for the recipe. If you don't have a mortar and pestle to crush it put the leaves on a cutting board and use the flat side of a knife or back of a large spoon to mash them. Leave them sit until the recipe is ready for them. By opening them up to air their natural enzymes will be able to break down at least some of the offensive flavor chemicals.

For the cilantro lovers, here's an easy dish that can be appetizers for a party or dinner for the family. Make some with parsley too if someone doesn't like it. Enjoy!

Confetti Quesadillas and Dip

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| 1 ½ cups plain Greek yogurt | ¼ cup finely minced cilantro |
| ½ tsp salt | 12 soft corn tortillas |
| 1 cup (4 oz) shredded low fat Colby cheese | ¼ cup drained corn kernels |
| 1 cup (4 oz) shredded Monterey Jack cheese | 1 red bell pepper, minced |
| ¼ cup rinsed, drained black beans | 1 jalapeño, minced |
| ½ cup chopped fresh cilantro | |

Mix yogurt, ¼ cup cilantro and salt in bowl for dip. Refrigerate. Lay out 6 tortillas. Divide cheeses, corn, beans, peppers and cilantro over them equally. Top with other tortillas. Cook in hot skillet about 3 minutes on one side, flip, and cook another 1-2 minutes. Or cook over hot grill. Cut in wedges and serve with dip. Serves 6.

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