

Basil_1992.txt

I was once invited to a dinner party where the guests were invited to participate in the preparation of the meal. The menu included homemade pasta served with an Italian Pesto sauce. The pasta noodles were familiar to me and fun to make, but when it came time for the sauce, I was doubtful that any combination of basil, garlic and oil could be at all palatable. I'm happy to say that I was pleasantly surprised and have added this dish to my list of favorites.

Sweet Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), the main ingredient in the pesto sauce, is the most common of the many species of this Genus, and the one most often used in cooking. This herb has a pungent aroma (I would abstractly describe it as a combination of lemon, pepper and cloves) easily released with any disturbance. It's light green leaves to 4 inches long and 1-2 inches wide are the culinary part of the plant.

A vigorous grower in full sun and good soil, it forms a bush from 2 to 3 feet tall developing spikes of white flowers in summer. Basil grows easily from seed if sown in containers of light, well drained soil. Cover the seeds with about 1/8 inch of soil and keep the containers in a warm place until the first leaves pop through the soil (about 5 days). Plant outside when temperatures will not drop below 60 degrees, about 18 to 24 inches apart. Or, sow outside when the soil is thoroughly warmed. The early Greeks believed that Basil would not do well unless it was sown while cursing, shouting and stomping (surely the advent of the phrase "sowing the basil!").

Basil has been cultivated for over 5000 years in India and is considered holy. The Genus name "*Ocimum*" is Greek for 'fragrant' and the species "*basilicum*" means 'royal' or 'Kingly'.

The past holds many legends of this herb. Some physicians believed that it was not to be taken internally and that even smelling the herb would cause scorpions to breed in the brain, while others believed it would draw out the poison from snake and insect bites.

In early Salem, a pot of Basil on your porch was a possible sign of witchery! When planted with tomatoes, Basil will impart it's flavor to the fruit.

There are more than 60 named varieties of Basil, including lemon, clove,

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licorice, and camphor scented. 'Dark Opal' Basil has dark purple leaves, pink flowers and much the same habit and uses as Sweet Basil. In addition, this variety makes a beautiful and tasty herb vinegar for use in sauces and salads. 'Miniature Basil', a compact little bush about 8 inches high having very small leaves, is a good ornamental plant for edging the garden. The tender leaves of 'Lettuce leaf' Basil adds a peppery flavor to salads.

Basils are used to flavor soups, beans, stews, tomato dishes, and of course, Italian foods such as spaghetti, lasagna, and pizza.

Easily grown in most gardens, Basil is a great start to growing your own herbs. Plant a few plants in your vegetable garden or in a large container and when you see the difference fresh herbs can make, you'll want to grow more!

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