



The Herb Society of America - New Orleans Unit

Basil

Herb of the Year - 2003

Basil belongs to the genus *Ocimum* and is a member of the mint family (Labiatae). The genus includes over sixty species of annuals, non-woody perennials and shrubs. It is native to Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and South America. It did not arrive in Europe until more than 2,000 years ago. It is thought to have been brought to Ancient Greece by Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.), to have made its way to England from India in the mid 1500s and to have arrived in the United States in the early 1600s.

The folklore of basil is as complex as its flavor and aroma. In terms of its legend and symbolism, basil has been both loved and feared. Its associations include such opposites as love and hate, danger and protection, and life and death. Basil was once regarded with the gravest suspicion. This theory may be based in a strange old superstition that connected the plant with scorpions. Some ancient cultures considered basil a sacred plant. It was used by Indians to swear oaths in court. The Greek Orthodox Church considered it holy when it was reportedly found growing outside of Christ's tomb; they used it in preparing holy water and to adorn church altars. Italian tradition used basil as a sign of chastity when pinned on a woman's clothing. On the other hand, a pot of basil on a windowsill signified that a woman was ready to entertain her lover. It was used to cure melancholy, but too much basil was thought to dull the sight.

Physically, basil plants are characterized by square, branching stems, opposite leaves, brown or black seeds (also called millets) and flower spikes. Flower color and the size, shape, color and texture of the leaves vary by species. The herb has been in cultivation so long that numerous cultivars exist. The fragrance and taste of most basil plants contain anise, mint, the spice of cinnamon and/or cloves, and floral tones. Large-leaved green basil plants, such as Sweet Basil, Genoa Basil, and Lettuce Leaf Basil can grow to 3 feet in height. Small-leaved green forms such as Dwarf Basil, Spicy Globe Basil, and Bush Basil will grow to 12 inches in height and as broad. Reddish-purple variations such as Dark Opal, Red Rubin, and Purple Ruffles tend to be intermediate in size and have purple flowers instead of white. Novelty basil plants, named for their fragrance and flavor, include varieties such as Cinnamon Basil, Lemon Basil, Lime Basil and Thai Basil.

Many of the basil plants are tender annuals in most of the U.S. and Canada, though perennial in the warm temperate and tropical regions in which they originated. As a tropical plant, basil requires plenty of heat and light. They are easily grown from seeds or from cuttings. In the New Orleans Zone, seeds or transplants may be planted outside after danger of frost, and grown throughout the spring, summer and fall until frost reappears. Basil also may be successfully grown in containers. Basil should be pruned regularly to promote branching and to maximize growth.

Basil may be the world's favorite culinary herb. Almost every ethnic cuisine uses basil as an ingredient. The flavor of fresh leaves is outstanding in salads, with fresh or cooked tomatoes, infused as tea, with almost any vegetable, in soups, with meats, in sauces, and the list is endless. Of course, basil is the key ingredient in pesto. Large leaves can be torn or chopped, and small leaves can be used whole. To insure the best flavor, add to fresh dishes soon after cutting and in the last few minutes in cooked dishes. Your own taste determines what type of basil to use as well as how much. One thing is for certain: there is a basil to suit everyone's fancy. Enjoy growing, harvesting, cooking, smelling, and eating the basil of your choice!

Sources:

The Herb Society of America. Basil: An Herb Society of America Guide. October 10, 2003. <http://www.herbsociety.org/basil>
Belsinger, Susan and De Baggio, Thomas. *Basil - An Herb Lover's Guide*. Loveland, CO: Interweave, 1996.
Bremness, Lesley. *The Complete Book of Herbs - A Practical Guide to Growing & Using Herbs*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
Atha, Anthony. *The Ultimate Herb Book*. New York: Black Dog and Leventhal, 1996.



Italian Basil Recipes

Tomato Basil Wine Soup

2 cups chopped fresh tomatoes or one 14 1/2 oz can tomatoes
2 tablespoon all-purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 cup dry white wine
2 tablespoon butter
1 tablespoon snipped fresh basil
1 cup half-and-half or light cream
1/4 1/2 teaspoon salt
Dash pepper
1 teaspoon snipped fresh lemon thyme

If using fresh tomatoes, process or blend until the tomatoes are pureed. Strain and discard the solids (seeds and skins). If using canned tomatoes, process or blend until pureed. Place pureed tomatoes in a saucepan with the butter. Stir in the flour, salt, soda, and pepper. Stir in the half-and-half or light cream. Cook and stir over medium heat until the mixture is nearly bubbly. Stir in the white wine and cook, uncovered over low heat for 15 minutes. Add the fresh basil and lemon thyme. Makes 5 or 6 1/2 cup servings. Source: Barclay, Gwen and Hill, Madeline. "Herbal Repast" Country Gardens Magazine: November 1999.

Warm Spinach and Basil Salad

6 cups fresh spinach leaves
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
2 cups fresh basil leaves
1/2 cup pine nuts
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/2 cup best quality olive oil
4 oz prosciutto, sliced
1/2 cup Parmesan cheese

Toss the spinach and basil together in a large salad bowl. Heat the oil in a medium size skillet over medium heat. Add the garlic and pine nuts and saute until the nuts begin to brown slightly. Stir in the prosciutto and cook about 1 minute more. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Toss the spinach and basil with warm dressing and sprinkle with the Parmesan cheese. Serve immediately. Serves 6. Source: Rosso, Julee and Lukins. Sheila. The Silver Palate Goodtimes Cookbook. NY, NY: Workman: 1984.

Italian Style Pesto

5 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced
1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1/4 cup pine nuts
3/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
4 cups basil leaves
1 pound dry pasta
Salt

You may use a mortar and pestle to crush, or a food processor. Whatever method is used, the finished product should be very smooth, without any big pieces. In a mortar and pestle, crush ingredients one by one in the order listed above, beginning with garlic and pine nuts and ending with olive oil. If using a food processor, combine garlic, pine nuts, basil, salt, and a few tablespoons of the olive oil. Process until mixed. Add the cheese and most of the remaining oil and process until smooth. Taste for seasoning, and add more cheese, salt, or oil. Cook the pasta until it is al dente. Toss the pasta with the pesto using a few tablespoons of the hot pasta water to thin the pesto so that it coats the pasta evenly. Serve immediately. Source: Belsinger, Susan and DiBaggio, Thomas. Basil - An Herb Lover's Guide. Loveland, CO: Interweave, 1996.

Ratatouille with Basil

1 Bermuda Onion, chopped finely
1 green pepper, chopped
1/2 lb tomatoes, chopped
freshly ground black pepper
2 eggplants
1 red pepper, chopped
2 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed
3 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
sea salt
1/2 lb small zucchini, unpeeled and sliced
approx. 1/3 cup sunflower seed oil

Cut the unpeeled eggplants into cubes and sprinkle with salt; leave for 20 minutes to drain. Heat the oil in a broad heavy pan. Cook the onion gently for about 6 minutes. Pat the eggplant dry with paper towels and add to the onion with the peppers. Sew gently, adding more oil if necessary, for about 10 minutes, then add the zucchini and cook for another 5 minutes. Finally, add the tomatoes and garlic and cook for 10 minutes or more until all is slightly mushy. Add plenty of salt and black pepper and stir in the chopped basil. This dish is equally good served hot or cold. It serving hot leave for 4-5 minutes after adding basil to allow flavor to permeate. Serve as an hors d'oeuvre or as a vegetable dish. Source: Boxer, Arabella and Back, Phillipa. The Herb Book. London: Octopus, 1980.

Neapolitan Pizza with Fresh Basil

2 balls premade pizza dough, about 1 lb each
1 cup fresh whole basil leaves, washed and dried
1/2 lb. mozzarella cheese, sliced thin or grated
2 large red or yellow tomatoes, peeled, seeded and sliced thin
4 cloves garlic, minced
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Spread the premade pizza dough over pizza pans. Arrange the tomato slices and basil over the dough. Sprinkle with minced garlic. Spread with the mozzarella cheese, and drizzle with olive oil. Top with a few gratings of black pepper. Bake for 15 - 20 minutes until the cheese is melted and the bottom crust is golden brown. Remove from oven, let rest for 3 min, and serve. Serves 4-6. Source: Sombke, Laurence. Beautiful Easy Herbs. Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 1997.

Lemon or Anise Basil Biscotti

3 1/2 cups unbleached flour
1 1/2 cups sugar
Generous 1/2 cup chopped lemon or anise basil
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
2/3 cups sliced almonds, toasted and ground
1/4 teaspoon baking soda
Large pinch salt
3 extra large eggs
1 tablespoon lemon zest or 1 teaspoon anise seed, bruised

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Butter and flour 2 baking sheets. In bowl, combine 3 c flour, baking powder and soda, salt, sugar and mix. Make a well and add the eggs; beat them with a fork in the well. Add vanilla, lemon basil and zest, or anise basil and anise seed, and stir with a fork; mix most of flour in, and then add almonds and blend well. Using the remaining 1/2 c flour, flour a flat surface and your hands and turn the dough onto the surface. Knead the dough together, working in the remaining flour. Add more flour if needed, and divide the dough into 2 pieces. Roll them into 2 cylinders about 2 1/2 inches wide. Place the cylinders on the prepared baking sheet. Bake for 25 min. Remove from the oven and reduce oven to 300 degrees. Slice the rolls diagonally into slices 1/2 to 3/4 inches thick. Arrange on baking sheets and bake for 15 minutes. Turn the biscotti and bake for 15 minutes more. Cool on baking racks. Pack them into tins with tight-fitting lids. They are better the second day and will keep well for a few weeks. Source: Belsinger, Susan and DiBaggio, Thomas. Basil - An Herb Lover's Guide. Loveland, CO: Interweave, 1996.

Greek Basil Recipes

Meatballs with Tomato Sauce

1 pound beef, freshly ground
1 garlic clove
Salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons tomato paste mixed with 1 cup water or beef stock

1 large onion, minced
1/2 cup minced parsley
1 cup flour for rolling

3 tablespoons long grain rice
1 tablespoons fresh basil
Olive oil for frying

Combine meat, onion, rice, garlic, parsley, basil, salt, and pepper. Dip hands in flour. Shape meat mixture into round balls about 1 1/2 inches in diameter. Heat oil in a skillet. Saute the meatballs, turning to brown on all sides. Remove to a baking dish. Pour tomato paste liquid into the skillet. Simmer 3 minutes, stirring constantly. Strain the juices over the meatballs and add as much water or beef stock as needed to half cover them. Loosely cover with foil. Bake at 350 degrees about 40 minutes. Once or twice during the cooking, turn meatballs with a wooden spoon. Source: Culinary Arts Institute Adventures in Cooking Series - Greek Cookbook

Spinach Salad with Lamb and Basil

1 1/2 pound boneless lamb loin
3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh basil leaves
10 ounces soft mild goat cheese

1/2 cups + 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
5 red bell peppers, roasted and peeled
1 bunch spinach about 6 cups packed

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

Trim and tie lamb. Season lamb with salt and pepper and in a plastic bag combine lamb, 2 T olive oil, 1 T basil, turning lamb to coat evenly. Marinate lamb, covered and chilled, 4 hrs. Cut roasted peppers into thin 2-in. long strips and combine with vinegar and 2 T olive oil. Chill peppers, covered. Coarsely crumble goat cheese and gently stir together with 2 T olive oil and 1 T basil. Chill goat cheese, covered. Blend remaining 1/4 c olive oil, 1 T basil, salt and pepper to taste until smooth. Chill while preparing lamb and bring to room temperature before assembling salad. Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Heat a skillet and brown lamb on all sides. Put skillet in oven and roast lamb about 10 minutes, or until a meat thermometer registers 140 degrees for medium rare. Cool lamb. Chill lamb, covered at least 2 hours and up to 1 day. Cut lamb into thin slices. Arrange spinach around edges of 4 large plates. Scatter peppers evenly over spinach and mound some goat cheese in center of each plate. Arrange lamb slices around goat cheese and drizzle salads with basil oil. Source: Epicurious Food. Gourmet July 1997. October 2, 2003 <http://www.epicurious.com>

Tomatoes with Yogurt and Basil

1 pound tomatoes
pinch of sugar
2 tablespoons pine nuts

1/2 cup butter
1 1/4 cup unflavored yogurt
1-

sea salt and black pepper 2
tablespoons chopped basil

Skin the tomatoes and chop coarsely, allowing excess juice to drain away. Melt the butter in a shallow pan and cook the tomatoes gently until softened without getting mushy. Remove the pan from heat. Add salt and pepper to taste and a pinch of sugar. Have the yogurt at room temperature, beat it until smooth and stir into the pan. Stir in the chopped basil, pour into a shallow serving dish and scatter the pine nuts over the top. If you like, garnish with triangles of flat bread, toasted crisp. Serve immediately, or keep warm, but do not reheat after adding yogurt. Source: Boxer, Arabella and Back, Phillipa. The Herb Book. London: Octopus, 1980.

Greek Feta Shrimp

1 teaspoon minced garlic
2 cups peeled, seeded, chopped tomato
1 1/2 pounds (about 42) shrimp, shelled
Pasta cooked

5 tablespoons olive oil
1 1/4 cups minced fresh basil leaves
1/8 teaspoon dried red hot pepper
2 tablespoons butter.

1/2 cup dry white wine
1 tsp. dried oregano
1/2 pound feta crumbled

In heavy skillet, cook garlic in 2 T olive oil, stirring for 1 minute. Add wine, basil, oregano, salt and pepper to taste and simmer; stir occasionally. Season shrimp with salt and pepper. In large skillet, cook shrimp in remaining 3 T olive oil over high heat, 1 to 2 minutes, until just pink and firm. Sprinkle with hot pepper. Transfer to ovenproof dish and sprinkle with feta. Spoon sauce over top and bake for 10 minutes in 400-degree oven. Toss pasta with butter and serve. Source: COOKS.COM. October 2, 2003 <http://www.cooks.com>

Zucchini with Orzo and Fresh Herbs

4 medium zucchini, washed and thinly sliced
1 1/2 cups boiling water
3 tbs. fresh basil chopped

1/2 medium onion, finely chopped
1/3 cup orzo (Greek rice-like pasta)
1 tablespoon fresh oregano chopped

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
salt and black pepper to taste
1 clove of minced garlic

Saute' the zucchini and onion in a skillet until the onion is transparent and the zucchini is tender. Add garlic and cook a few minutes more. Add the basil and oregano and remove from heat. Add orzo to boiling water and simmer for about 15 minutes, or until tender. Stir frequently to prevent sticking and lumps. Drain any excess water from the orzo and combine with the zucchini mixture. If it is dry, add a little more olive oil. Add salt and pepper to taste. Source: Alice Crow Orillion

Iced Tea with Cinnamon Basil

2 quarts water
1/4 cup - 1/3 cup sugar - optional

3 tablespoons black tea or 4 teabags
1 orange, halved and thinly sliced

3 cups cinnamon basil
. Sprigs of cinnamon basil for garnish

Bring the water to a boil in a nonreactive saucepan and remove it from the heat. Make an infusion with the water, black tea, and cinnamon basil. Stir in the sugar, if desired. Let the infusion cool to room temperature and strain it into a glass jar or pitcher. Add the orange slices and refrigerate until cold. Serve over ice. Source: Belsinger, Susan and DiBaggio, Thomas. Basil - An Herb Lover's Guide. Loveland, CO: Interweave, 1996.

Thai Basil Recipes

Herb Salad Spring Rolls with Spicy Peanut Sauce

2 ounce package bean-thread (cellophane) noodles	1 1/2 tablespoons rice vinegar	2 large Boston lettuce leaves
8-8 inch rounds rice paper	2 tablespoons roasted peanuts, crushed	
1 scallion, cut into 2 inch julienne strips	1/4 cup finely shredded carrot	1/3 cup thinly sliced cabbage
1/4 cup Fresh Thai Basil	1/4 cup fresh mint	1/4 cup fresh cilantro

Soak noodles in very hot water to cover 15 minutes and drain well. Reserve half of noodles for another use. Cut remaining noodles into 3 inch lengths and toss with vinegar and salt to taste. Cut out and discard ribs from lettuce leaves, halving each leaf. Soak 2 rounds rice paper in hot water until pliable, 1 minute. Spread 1 soaked round on a towel and blot with paper towels. Arrange 1 piece of lettuce leaf on bottom half of round. Top lettuce with 1/4 of peanuts & noodles. Top noodles with 1/4 of scallion, carrot, cabbage & herbs. Roll up, folding insides after first roll to enclose filling. Spread and blot remaining round. Wrap around spring roll in the same manner. Wrap roll in damp paper towel and put in plastic bag. Make other 3 rolls. Halve rolls & serve at room temperature with peanut sauce.

Spicy Peanut Sauce

3 garlic cloves, minced	1/4 teaspoon dried hot red pepper flakes	1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 tablespoon tomato paste	3 tablespoons creamy peanut butter	3 tablespoons hoisin sauce
1/3 teaspoon on water	1/4 cup water	

Cook garlic and red pepper flakes in oil over moderate heat, stirring, until garlic is golden. Whisk in remaining ingredients and bring to a boil, whisking. Simmer sauce, whisking, until thickened, about 1 minute. Serve sauce warm or at room temperature. Source: Epicurious Food. Gourmet June 1995. October 13, 2003 <http://www.epicurious.com>

Shrimp Broth with Herbs

3/4 pound uncooked large shrimp	6 - 14 1/2 ounce cans low salt chicken broth	1 cup finely chopped carrot
1/3 cup thinly sliced fresh lemongrass	3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh ginger	2 tablespoons minced garlic
1 1/2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh basil	1 1/2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint	
1 1/2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh cilantro	1 small serrano chili, thinly sliced in rounds	1 1/2 teaspoons fresh lime juice

6 thin lime slices. For garnish

Peel and devein shrimp; reserve shells. Halve shrimp lengthwise. Transfer shrimp to small bowl. Cover and chill. Combine reserved shrimp shells, broth and next 4 ingredients in large pot. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat; simmer uncovered 20 minutes to blend flavors, stirring and skimming surface occasionally. Strain broth into large bowl, discard solids. Return broth to pot. Bring to simmer. Remove from heat. Add shrimp, herbs, chili and lime juice. Cover and let stand until shrimp are opaque, about 2 minutes. Source: Epicurious Food. Bon Appetit July 1998. October 13, 2003 <http://www.epicurious.com>

Green Curry with Chicken and Thai Eggplant

2 stalks lemon grass, cut into 2 inch pieces	1 tablespoons sliced galangal	1 teaspoon cumin
1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro	8 garlic cloves	10 green Thai chili peppers
10 green jalapeno peppers	1 teaspoon shrimp paste	1 tablespoon chopped shallot

2 cups coconut milk	1 pound boned chicken breast, sliced in 2 inch pieces	
1/4 cup fish sauce	3 tablespoons sugar	
1 cup Thai eggplant or 1 cup bamboo shoots	1/2 cup coconut cream	6 fresh kaffir lime leaves
1/4 cup. sweet basil leaves	redjalapeño pepper for garnish	

Place all the green curry paste ingredients in blender and process until the mixture is smooth, or pound in a pestle and mortar. Pour the coconut milk and the green curry paste into a large saucepan. Heat to boiling and add the chicken, fish sauce and sugar. Cook for 5 minutes at a slow boil. Add the eggplant and reheat to boiling, simmering for 2 minutes. Add the coconut cream and stir to combine. Add the kaffir lime leaves and basil leaves. Remove the contents to a serving bowl, garnish with the red pepper and serve. Source: Poladitmontri, Panurat and Lew, Judy. Thailand - The Beautiful Cookbook.

Curried Shrimp with Basil

2 tablespoons oil	3 garlic cloves, minced	
8 ounces shrimp, peeled and deveined	1 teaspoon curry powder	2 tablespoons fish sauce
1 tablespoon oyster sauce	1 1/2 tablespoons sugar	1/4 cup sliced green bell pepper
1/4 cup. sliced red bell pepper	1/4 cup fresh basil leaves	1/4 cup sliced onions

Heat a large skillet and add the oil, garlic and shrimp. Saute' for 1 minute. Add all the other ingredients and cook for 2 minutes. Serve with steamed jasmine rice. Serves 4.

Source: Poladitmontri, Panurat and Lew, Judy. Thailand - The Beautiful Cookbook.

Basil Lime Cookies

2 cups sifted all-purpose flour	1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder	1/2 teaspoon salt
2/3 cup softened butter or margarine	1 cup sugar	1 egg
1 teaspoon vanilla extract	3 tablespoons fresh cinnamon basil, chopped	
1 tablespoon. finely chopped lime peel	1 cup pistachios chopped	

Sift first 3 ingredients; set aside. Beat butter at medium speed until light. Gradually beat in sugar; add egg, vanilla, basil and lime peel, beating until very light and fluffy. At low speed, beat in dry ingredients in 3 or 4 additions. Mix in chopped nuts. Turn out dough onto lightly floured surface; divide in half. Shape each half into a roll 6-7 inches long. Roll in plastic wrap. Refrigerate until firm, at least 8 hours. When ready to bake, preheat oven to 375 degrees. Cut dough into 1/8 inch slices and place 2 inches apart on ungreased cookie sheet. Bake 8-10 minutes, or until lightly brown. Cool on wire rack and store in airtight container. (Rolls of dough may be frozen.) Source: Barclay, Gwen & Hill, Madeline & Hardy, Jean. Southern Herb Growing.