

Beets to Build Your Heart and Bones

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Growing up, the only beets I ever tasted were canned beets that my mom then “pickled” with onions and hard boiled eggs. I thought they were truly horrible and avoided beets for a very long time. When I first tasted freshly cooked beets, I was amazed at the difference! Smooth, buttery with a hint of earthiness, the roots were delightful. Later, as I got to know greens, I found out how tasty the beet greens are and how easy they are to cook. Now, I only buy beets with the greens still on, since I’m getting two veggies in one!

Beets contain folate, choline and betaine, a combination that has been shown to decrease inflammatory markers such as C Reactive Protein, homocysteine and interleukin-6. This is good news for those with heart disease, diabetes, and many other chronic diseases including autoimmune disorders. Even osteoporosis may arise from high levels of inflammation related to elevated homocysteine levels. The folate found in beets is also helpful for pregnant women, as it decreases the incidence of neural tube defects in the developing fetus.

Beets are related to Swiss chard, and their leaves can be cooked in similar ways. The beet root itself contains high levels of betacarotene, and the leaves contain lutein/zeaxanthin. Pink beets and golden beets have less betacarotene than red beets, but other components are similar.

When you purchase beets with the greens still on, trim them down to 2 inches or so, and store the greens separate from the root. The root will keep for several weeks, unwashed, in the fridge; the greens should be used within the week. Raw beets don’t freeze well, as they get soft on thawing, though cooked beets handle freezing well. Red beets will “bleed” their color onto your hands; it’s best to not peel the beets until after they are cooked. Any stains can be washed off with soap and water or even a bit of lemon juice. Avoid salting until the end of cooking, as salt will blunt the color of the beets.

One of the simplest ways to use beets is to grate them raw into salads; this works best for fresh, small beets. Roasting chunks of beets in the oven is also easy; I keep them separate from other veggies that I’m roasting, or the entire pan ends up looking red! Steaming beets can also be fast, especially if you cut them into cubes first (an exception to the rule of “don’t peel first”). Once you’ve either roasted or steamed the beets, you can keep them for fast meals at a later time.

For instance, you can reheat cooked beet cubes with olive oil in which you’ve infused mustard seeds, ground cumin and ground fennel. Eat this hot, or room temp with goat cheese. You can even add an orange juice/balsamic vinegar dressing. Another quick addition to cooked beets is chopped walnuts and either feta or goat cheese. For a spectacular and quite easy holiday side dish, roast several beets. While they cook, saute sweet onions and bosc pears, both chopped, until soft. Add a small amount of vinegar

and possibly some raw sugar if the pears aren't all that sweet. Then puree the onions and pears in a food processor; add the beets and continue to process but leave the dish slightly chunky. Even people who think they don't like beets love this one!