

Summer Abundance

Wendy Warner, MD, ABHM

If the season has been good to you, you're probably wondering what to do with all the cucumbers and summer squash you have in your garden (or how to say "no thanks" to those gardener friends of yours trying to share their abundance). Someone asked me recently what each of these vegetables are good for other than for "crunch", as they seem to be mostly water. They actually pack in a lot of nutrients in a small space.

The flesh of the cucumber contains mostly water, ascorbic acid and caffeic acid. This combination explains why cucumbers can be so helpful in soothing skin swelling and rashes. Also, getting more ascorbic acid (Vitamin C) is always a good idea to boost your immune system. The skin of the cucumber contains a large amount of fiber, along with silica, potassium and magnesium. The fiber in the skin is beautifully packaged along with the fluid in the flesh, a perfect combination for better digestion of the fiber. Silica is important in nail and hair strength, and potassium and magnesium are important for heart health, among other things.

To peel or not to peel? There are some recipes which would be ruined by adding in the cucumber peel, but the bigger issue is whether or not the cucumber is waxed and with what kind of coating. Many kinds of commercial coatings are available; the most common plant based coating is carnauba palm. However, coatings can have added ethyl alcohol or ethanol for consistency, milk casein for "film forming" as well as soaps as flowing agents. Some pesticides get trapped in these coatings. Vegetable "washes" do a variable job in getting these coatings off the cucumber, so it's probably still best to buy local organic vegetables that haven't been waxed, and don't peel them.

Summer squashes contain many nutrients important for cardiovascular health, including potassium, manganese, folate and magnesium. Also, extracts of summer squashes have been shown to help decrease benign prostatic hypertrophy, a commonly found enlargement of the prostate that occurs with age.

Many summer squashes also contain oxalates, compounds that can crystallize and cause problems in people with untreated kidney and gallbladder disease. Notice that I said "untreated"---if you're stable, you can typically tolerate a moderate amount of oxalate-containing foods in your diet. Some people also worry about calcium absorption in the face of oxalates; although this is theoretically a problem, no clinical study has shown enough blocking of calcium to be significant. It's definitely still worth eating these foods!

Here's a cucumber salad that serves as a great base for grilled salmon or chicken:

3 cups very thinly sliced cucumber

2 tbl minced jalapeno pepper, fresh
½ cup chopped scallion
3 tbl chopped fresh cilantro
1 ½ tbl chopped fresh mint
2 tbl fresh lemon juice
1 tbl soy or tamari sauce
1 tbl olive oil

Mix the first five ingredients together. Whisk the following three ingredients together. Just prior to serving, combine the dressing with the remaining salad (doing this too soon dilutes the flavor as it mixes with the juice from the cucumber). Salt and pepper to taste. Serve under grilled salmon or chicken.