

**FRESH IS BEST** Herbs like oregano, thyme, and parsley boost health.



A HELPING OF HERBS CAN ADD FORMIDABLE FLAVOR—AND ANTIOXIDANT POWERS—TO ANY MEAL BY BRUCE BURNETT

# The Magic Garden

FLAVORING YOUR FOOD with herbs, rather than salt or an extra swipe of butter, may sound like that yeah-right kind of nutritional advice—instead of a cupcake, snack on steamed broccoli. But in the case of herbs, it shouldn't take superhuman willpower to shift your loyalties to the little greenish-brownish specks. They're tasty and loaded with enough antioxidants to justify skipping the extra salt.

As a runner, it's a good idea to include lots of antioxidants in your diet. That's because when you run hard or long, you take in a lot of oxygen, which is an unstable molecule. Once inside your body, these molecules can change form and oxidize other molecules. The more you run, the more oxidation occurs. Oxidation damages tissues—short-term in the form of muscle soreness, and long-term it can contribute to the development of heart disease and cancer. "Since strenuous exercise encourages the oxidation process, it is vitally important for runners to ensure they have adequate antioxidants in their diet," says Stephen Faulkner, M.D., an expert in orthomolecular medicine (nutritional healing) in Duncan, British

Columbia. Antioxidants help fend off the damage rogue oxygen molecules can cause to your cells.

Although fruits and vegetables have traditionally been regarded as the best dietary sources of antioxidants, a report

## WARMUPS



## Super Soup

This recipe for Herbed Carrot Soup, reprinted from *HerbWise: Growing Cooking Wellbeing* by Bruce Burnett (HerbWise Inc., 2002), is high in antioxidants, thanks to the carrots and the variety of herbs included. It serves four.

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| <b>2 pounds of carrots, chopped</b>  | <b>2 cloves of garlic, crushed</b>          |
| <b>1 large onion, diced</b>  | <b>4 tablespoons of butter</b>              |
| <b>6 sprigs of fresh parsley, three sprigs of fresh thyme or 1 teaspoon of dried thyme, and six black peppercorns, bundled together so that they can be easily removed after cooking</b> | <b>6 cups of vegetable or chicken stock</b> |
|  | <b>Freshly grated mace or nutmeg</b>        |
|  | <b>Salt and pepper to taste</b>             |

Lightly sauté the onion and garlic in the butter. Add the stock and carrots and simmer for about 15 minutes. Add the bundle of herbs and continue to simmer for another 20 minutes. Remove the herbs, allow the soup to cool, and put it through the blender in batches. Reheat the soup over low heat while adding the mace or nutmeg and salt and pepper to taste. Serve with some fresh, homemade bread and garnish with some fresh parsley and a little chopped fresh thyme.

by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the November 2001 issue of the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry* revealed that common kitchen herbs have surprisingly high antioxidant contents. For example, fresh oregano has 42 times the antioxidant intensity of apples and four times more than blueberries per gram. True, you're not likely to chow down on a bowl of oregano, but even the tablespoon sprinkled over your pizza offers antioxidant benefits. The herb is also a rich source of nutrients, including vitamin A, niacin, phosphorus, potassium, iron, calcium, and zinc. Oregano, with its slightly peppery, minty sharpness, is famous for enhancing the flavor of tomato-based dishes and pasta sauces and is superb with chicken.

Oregano's hardy cousin, sweet marjoram, with its earthy flavor, was also cited as an antioxidant leader in the USDA report. It contains a high amount of tannin as well, which aids in the digestion of rich foods and is ideal for more substantial fall and winter cooking. The herb especially complements egg, sausage, pork, and cheese dishes.

Other potent herbs mentioned in the

report include bay, dill, thyme, rosemary, and sage. On top of their high antioxidant content, they all add fat-free flavor at a minimal calorie cost. Tangy bay leaves are perfect in winter soups and stews. Dill's citrus flavor works well with fish, potatoes, and salad dressings. Thyme, a robust Mediterranean herb with a subtle lemon taste, is great with meat and poultry dishes, while aromatic rosemary is superb with lamb and pork. And sage, a pleasantly pungent herb, is best in sausages and stuffings but also provides a rich tang to vegetarian dishes.

### From Window Pot to Crock Pot

To get the maximum flavor and nutrition from the herbs you eat, choose fresh herbs over dried whenever possible—with the exception of bay leaves—since fresh are usually a bit higher in antioxidants, as well as tastier. Most grocery and health-food stores carry a large selection of fresh and dried herbs. (As a rule, one tablespoon of fresh herbs equals one teaspoon of dried when cooking.) If you have any kind of a green thumb, consider growing your own. Growing herbs indoors through the winter can be done

if you have a window with southern or western exposure that allows about five hours of daylight. Most herbs will thrive in dry, rocky, slightly alkaline soil. Just water seedlings until well established, then water minimally.

To avoid overcooking herbs, which can become bitter when they are cooked for too long, add them toward the end of the preparation process, usually within the last 10 to 15 minutes. You can even try sprinkling fresh uncooked herbs over the dish *after* it's out of the oven. Bay leaves, again the exception, do not become bitter during cooking and will give more flavor to a dish when added at the start. And some curry dishes are more flavorful when the meat and/or vegetables are married to the spices in a long, slow cooking process. A good recipe should offer instructions as to when it's best to add the herbs.

But whether you yank them from your garden or sprinkle them from your spice rack, include herbs in your diet daily for their antioxidant capabilities and their fat-free flavor-enhancing abilities. In this case, good health and good taste really do go together. **RW**