

Sensational Salads

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Have you noticed salads are enjoying a revival with many exciting colors, shapes, textures and tastes? Salads have been a mainstay in meal planning for years as they add color, texture, and freshness. Salads are also a great way to incorporate a variety of vegetables and other healthy foods into meals. While a basic garden salad is still a good choice, creative

dishes have been introduced, moving salads into something more than a side dish.

Through improved technology and transportation, today's consumers have greater access to a variety of foods year round. With such diverse selections, consumers have been able to increase the creativity in their culinary offerings. More recently, salads have taken main-

stage as the addition of proteins, like nuts or meat, and dairy products, such as cheese, have increased their popularity.

One of the most popular types of salads is a garden salad. These salads usually start with greens from the lettuce or cabbage family (see Table 1). A variety of other ingredients such as vegetables, fruit or nuts are sometimes added, then tossed with a dressing to enhance flavor.



Nutritional Value of Greens

Greens are packed with vitamins, minerals, and other healthy nutrients. Some of the most common nutrients found in greens include vitamins A, C, and K, calcium, fiber, and folate. The health benefits of greens are not limited to these nutrients. They are an excellent choice for reducing caloric intake, as many provide less than 30 calories per serving. Two cups of raw leafy greens or shredded, chopped lettuce is considered one serving of vegetables. In addition, dark greens are an excellent source

Table 1. Common salad greens.

Butterhead lettuce	Arugula	Chard
Iceberg lettuce	Cabbage	Chicory or Frisee
Green leaf lettuce	Nappa or Chinese cabbage	Escarole
Red leaf lettuce	Radicchio	Kale
Romaine lettuce	Spinach	Watercress

of antioxidants, which may reduce the risk of some diseases like cancer.

Keep in mind that some medications may interact with certain vitamins commonly found in greens. For example, high amounts of vitamin K in the diet may reduce the effectiveness of certain blood-thinning medications. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have concerns.

Selecting

Moisture is key when selecting fresh greens. Look for leaves that are bright and tender. Avoid greens that are limp, torn or dry as this indicates diminished quality, as well as, reduced nutritional value. If selecting a type of head or leaf lettuce, such as Iceberg, Bibb, or Butter, choose heavier products. This indicates more moisture and freshness. Avoid head or leaf lettuces with dark stems or leaf tips as this could indicate the head is not as fresh.

Preparing

Tender greens should be handled with care to avoid damaging the leaves. For heads of lettuce and cabbage, remove the outermost layer of leaves and discard. Gently rinse and rub the leaves under cool, running water. No soap or specific product is necessary to wash produce. Friction is impor-

tant to loosen any grit or dirt. Pat the leaves dry using paper towels or use a salad spinner to remove excess water. Dry leaves are important for salads as they allow salad dressing to adhere to the leaves.

Storing

Greens have a relatively short shelf life. To maximize optimum flavor and nutrient value, they should be used within three to five days of purchase depending on the type. Tender greens need to be used more quickly while sturdier greens such as kale may last up to a week. Once rinsed and dried, use immediately or store greens in a clean plastic bag or container in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. It is often the coldest area and protected from the defrosting mode of the refrigerator. It is best to store greens away from fruits as they cause greens to spoil more quickly. Some slightly wilted greens may be revived by soaking in chilled water for up to an hour.

Ready-to-Eat Salad Mixes

Most grocery stores and supermarkets carry ready-to-eat salad mixes which contain a variety of greens and/or cabbages. These can be more expensive, but are a great option for those who want to enjoy the

convenience and avoid waste. Over rinsing can actually damage the produce, reducing the quality and increasing the risk of cross-contamination from handling or coming in contact with other surfaces.

Salad Dressings

Salad dressings are essentially sauces for a salad. Salad dressing help blend the flavors in a salad. While greens are low in calories, most salad dressings are not. However, a small amount of fat can help your body use some nutrients found in the rest of the salad. Dressings should enhance the salad, so be mindful when selecting and using. A trick you can use to help your family use only the amount needed is to “dress” the salad before serving.

Salad dressings can be purchased premade and can be found refrigerated near the produce section or on shelves in the main section of the grocery. Make sure to check shelf-life. Keep in mind refrigerated dressings may have a significantly shorter shelf-life than traditional bottled dressings due to the preservatives used. Consumers can also mix their own dressing with a dry packaged herb/spice mix.

Many common salad dressings are a mixture of oil and vinegar called a vinaigrette. When selecting, look for

healthy oils such as canola or olive oil. Other common salad dressings are mayonnaise-based. It is important to check the nutrition facts label for serving size, calories, and ingredients.

One option to control calories and reduce preservatives is to mix your own dressing. Most dressings are simple to make and allow greater creativity with taste and variation. Some dressings can be made in advance to allow flavors to blend while others need to be used immediately. If refrigerating oil-based dressings, remove about 30 minutes prior to use to allow oil to liquefy. Mix well to blend ingredients before use.

Most dressings need to be added to salads just prior to eating as they tend to interact with the ingredients. Greens tend to wilt and become less crunchy the longer the dressing has

been applied. This is especially true of vinegar-based dressings. The more delicate the texture of the green, the lighter the salad dressing should be. For example, oil-based dressings are commonly found on spinach or Bibb lettuce salads, which are more delicate greens. Many mayonnaise-based salad dressings are common on sturdier salad greens like iceberg and romaine lettuces. When storing salad as a leftover, it is best to keep the salad dressing separate and toss right before serving.

Adding Variety to the Salad

Once the greens have been selected, the dressing and the other additions are easier to select. These ingredients are important as they add vital nutrients to the salad.

Add color and contrast. Vegetables such as peppers, carrots,

red onions and tomatoes add great color. Use different sizes, shapes and cuts to add interest.

Add natural sweetness. Fruit such as apples, blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, grapes, and canned, drained mandarin oranges add a natural sweetness and eye-catching color. Dried fruits, raisins, dried cranberries, or snipped dried pears are also popular and can add a chewier texture along with natural sweetness to salads.

Add texture and crunch. Croutons are still a popular way to add different flavors and crunch to salads but can carry unnecessary fats and little nutritional benefit. Items such as toasted nuts, pumpkin seeds, crispy noodles and tortilla strips can be great alternatives to add extra crunch and texture.

Add protein. Prepared or processed chicken, beef, tuna and salmon, as well as, hard-cooked eggs are great ways to turn a salad into a main meal. Other protein options include plant proteins such as rinsed black beans, garbanzo beans, or tofu. Adding plant proteins to your diet can reduce calories and increase fiber consumption. Additions of protein-based foods make a meal more balanced and may increase the feeling of being full after a meal.



Popular Salad Additions

Avocados

Avocados, sometimes called alligator pears, are great additions to salads. A serving size, which is one-third of a medium avocado, contains 80 calories and is virtually the only fruit which contains healthy monounsaturated fat. In addition, avocados contribute 20 vitamins and minerals to the diet. When shopping for avocado, consumers should look for produce that is firm but gently yields to pressure. For optimum flavor, ripen avocado in a paper bag at room temperature for two to three days. By containing gasses emitted from the fruit, it ripens quicker and more evenly. Once ripened, avocado can be stored in the refrigerator two or three days.

Nuts and Seeds

A way to add protein, healthy fats, and fiber to a salad is through the addition of nuts and seeds. There are a wide variety of nuts and seeds available that can enhance a salad with crunch and texture, such as almonds, walnuts, pecans, pine nuts, and sunflower seeds.

Many of these are a good source of monounsaturated fats and are great to have on hand for a go-to salad topping. Fats can go rancid if not stored properly and walnuts are the riskiest. Be sure to use nuts by the package expiration date. If you find a sale on shelled nuts, they can be stored in an airtight bag in the freezer for up to a year.

Whole Grains

To increase the varieties of texture and nutrition, add different whole grains. For example, quinoa (pronounced keen-wah), couscous, brown rice and barley are great added to green salads or slaws (salad with the primary component being raw, shredded cabbage). An addition of a grain will make a salad feel more wholesome and keep you feeling full for longer. It provides additional fiber, vitamins, and minerals.

Salads are a sensational way to add needed fruits and vegetables into your diet as they provide key nutrients. Adding protein, dairy products and a whole grain takes the salad from a side dish to a filling entrée. Salads are also a great way

to add interest and variety to meal planning and are a good choice for building a healthy lifestyle.

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