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Agriculture & Natural Resources



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The Health Benefits of Herbs

Are you looking for an easy and zestful way to add flavor and color to your meals while improving your health? If so, then next time you reach for the salt shaker consider replacing the salt with fresh or dried herbs. Culinary herbs such as basil, thyme, rosemary, oregano, and even garlic, contain not only fragrant flavors but are also packed with healthy antioxidants and phytochemicals. This may sound like the same benefits that fruits and vegetables have to offer, and that is correct. In fact, a USDA study found that one tablespoon of fresh oregano contains the same antioxidant activity as one medium-sized apple.

Just how do antioxidants and phytochemicals work to make you healthier? Both antioxidants and phytochemicals may be protective against some forms of cancer, heart disease, and stroke. Phytochemicals are naturally occurring compounds that are produced by plants to protect them from viruses, bacteria, fungi and insects. In humans, phytochemicals function to improve cellular communication, are anti-bacterial and function as antioxidants. The job of antioxidants is to sweep up free-radicals which can be damaging to body tissues and accelerate the aging process. The bottom line is phytochemicals and antioxidants can work as a team to help prevent disease while at the same time possessing unique and health promoting functions.

It is easy to give your health a boost by including a few herbs such as basil, oregano and parsley on poultry, pasta and pizzas. Explore exotic herbs such as turmeric which is found in curries. Experiment with dill in potato salads or cilantro in scrambled eggs. Many teas are also made with herbs and therefore have phytochemicals and antioxidants. Sip on chamomile tea as a relaxing evening ritual, or green tea as an afternoon treat. However, if you choose to purchase herbs that are concentrated such as oils or supplements, consider consulting your physician first, especially if you are pregnant or nursing. Certainly, the creative opportunities to incorporate herbs in your diet can be an adventure for the senses as well as a gift to the body.

To have a fresh supply of herbs on hand, start a mini herb garden by planting herbs in a container that has adequate drainage. Mix equal parts potting soil, peat moss, and perlite. Choose small growing herbs such as basil, thyme, and oregano. Water your plants when the top of the soil feels dry, which may be twice a day when it is hot and sunny. Pinch off the tops of the herbs to keep them bushy and use the cuttings to liven up your favorite recipes. Keep herbs in a sunny place and take pleasure in the health and beauty of these fragrant plants.

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