

CWA of NSW Product of the Week (March 2017)

Eggplant

In season now is the beautiful glossy eggplant. Look for firm, unblemished fruit and use within a couple of days, storing them in your vegetable crisper. The plant is thought to have origins in cultivation in both South Asia and China, with wild ancestors from India. It is now widely grown in most parts of the world which have sufficient length of warm summers to allow the fruit to mature.

Eggplant, *Solanum melangena*, also known in Australia by its French name as aubergine, and throughout Asia as brinjal, is a species of the nightshade family, as are tomato and potato. The variable sized purple-black, white, yellow, green or bicoloured fruits, used as a vegetable, are popular in many parts of the world. Throughout south Asia and most of the Mediterranean area this fruit is widely used in combination with other vegetables and meats or on its own as a side dish, often deep fried or stuffed with cheese and baked.

The nutritional benefits of eggplant include its vitamin content, particularly vitamins C, K and B6, thiamine, and niacin and reasonable levels of magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, manganese and copper, and its dietary fibre. The flesh is low in calories and low GI and high in antioxidants.

When it is raw, eggplant is bitter and astringent, but cooked, it has a rich complex flavour and it also absorbs the flavours of other ingredients in a dish. Early varieties of eggplant were particularly bitter, but modern varieties are much less so. Salting, rinsing and draining the flesh before cooking will reduce its absorption of fats in cooking. Eggplant is often used, especially in south Asian cooking, as a meat substitute in vegetarian dishes, but its low protein content means it should be used with pulses which provide protein.

Dishes featuring eggplant include Greek moussaka, a layered dish usually including eggplant, seasoned, minced lamb and tomatoes topped with a béchamel sauce; baba ghanoush, a dip of roasting the eggplant blended with garlic, lemon juice, olive oil and tahini paste; ratatouille, a slow-cooked stew of eggplant, tomatoes, and other vegetables; stuffed eggplants with meat, vegetable or cheese combinations, and deep fried eggplant slices, either battered or plain.

Recipe:

Baba Ghanoush (a Lebanese style dip or spread)

- 2 large eggplants (500g each)
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 tablespoons tahini
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- ¼ cup Greek style yoghurt
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin Australian olive oil
- ½ teaspoon sweet paprika

1 Oil a barbecue plate or chargrill and heat on medium-high heat. Pierce each eggplant 3 or 4 times with a skewer or sharp knife. Grill, turning regularly, for 10-12 minutes until charred and softened. Cool for 15 minutes.

2 trim ends of eggplants, remove and discard skin. Roughly chop flesh then place in a colander over a bowl to drain for 10 minutes. Process eggplant flesh with remaining ingredients until smooth, season with salt and pepper to taste.

3 Spoon into a bowl and drizzle with oil and sprinkle with paprika. Serve with Lebanese or crusty bread and olives, or use as a sandwich spread.

Source: *Taste.com.au*

Figs

The common edible fig, *Ficus carica*, is native to the Middle East and western Asia. Botanically, it is interesting in that the “fruits”, correctly known as the synconium, grow “inside out” with their flowers encased inside the outer capsule (infructescence) and are pollinated by fig wasps which make their way inside the fruit. Fresh figs are usually from varieties which will form fruit without pollination. Figs are widely grown throughout warmer areas of the world, but especially in the Middle East and Mediterranean. Figs are produced in spring, but the main crop is produced during mid to late summer and early autumn. Some varieties can be harvested up to four times in one season. Turkey is the largest producer of figs and most are grown in the Middle East and Mediterranean, but much of the breeding of modern varieties has occurred in California. Figs have been cultivated since ancient times and were important foods of the ancient Greeks and Romans. There are numerous references in both the Bible and the Quran to figs. The edible fig is considered to be a subtropical plant, but can be grown successfully in cooler areas where winters are relatively moderate. Fig trees thrive in the inland areas of NSW, and can be grown in the cooler tableland areas. Young trees are very susceptible to frost damage, especially if spring frosts are severe, so must be protected for the first few years. Figs are tolerant of most types of soil, but perform best on well-drained, reasonably fertile soils. Their root systems are fairly shallow, but extensive and susceptible to damage by cultivation.

When buying fresh figs, look for plump, slightly soft, but not mushy fruit with no obvious blemishes. Figs have a very short storage life and should be used as soon as possible after purchase, preferably within two days. Store them in a single layer in the refrigerator, covered in plastic wrap. Raw figs are best served at room temperature for the best flavour. Figs are sweet, high in dietary fibre, especially if dried, and provide reasonable levels of magnesium and manganese, but little of other major nutrients.

Figs can be eaten fresh or dried and in chutneys or jam, in muffins, scones, cakes, and biscuits, cooked in oatmeal, roasted in honey, slow roasted with meats such as lamb, stuffed with mascarpone and baked, used in a variety of appetisers, tarts and in ice cream. Other uses include fruity salads such as:

Recipe:

Fruity burghul (bulgur) salad with figs

- Prepare burghul (cracked wheat) by taking **1 ½ cups uncooked burghul** and add **1 ½ cups boiling water**, cover and let stand for 30 minutes until plump and tender
- Mix in a saucepan **¼ cup rice vinegar** (or cider vinegar if rice unavailable), **2Tbsp honey**, and **1/3 cup orange juice**. Bring to boil then remove from heat
- Add to vinegar mixture: **½ cup sultanas** and **½ cup chopped dried figs**. Steep for 10 minutes
- Finely dice **½ medium red onion** and **3 stalks of celery** and mix in a bowl.
- Add to bowl: **¼ cup extra virgin Australian olive oil**; **1Tbspn finely grated lemon zest** (from 2 lemons); **1 cup roasted almonds**, roughly chopped; **1tspn salt flakes** and freshly **ground black pepper**. Mix well then add steeping mixture and cooked burghul and combine gently.

Stand salad for at least one hour to allow flavours to develop. Serve at room temperature

Variation: use cooked brown rice or pearl barley in place of cracked wheat

Sweet Corn

Sweet corn, *Zea mays*, var *rugosa* is a popular crop and is at its peak in summer and early autumn. NSW is the major producer of sweet corn in Australia. Corn originated in Central America and has been grown for thousands of years by peoples of all of the Americas, spreading to the “old World” with the European settlers and traders returning from the Americas. Sweet corn is a type of corn which has a high sugar content and can be enjoyed in its fresh (“milk”) state as a vegetable, rather than taken through to maturity and used as a grain, as is field corn. Only about 20% of the sweet corn crop is sold into the fresh market, the remainder goes into frozen and canned corn products. Corn is best consumed with beans as each is deficient in an essential amino acid provided by the other. 100g of sweet corn provides approximately 19g of low GI carbohydrate, 3.2g protein and is a good source of B vitamins and vitamin C as well as a good source of dietary fibre.

Sweet corn is a rewarding home garden crop and an excellent vegetable for young gardeners to try! Pick corn when the silks have turned brown and the grains visible at the top of the ear are plump and tender. There are yellow, white and bicoloured varieties available. Fresh corn steamed on the cob or cooked on a barbecue in its husk then spread with a little butter and salt and pepper is hard to beat!

Recipe:

Sweet Corn Fritters

A good lunch dish for 2 or 3 with salad, a lunchbox filler or side dish. Also good eaten cold

- Mix together: kernels cut from two fresh cobs of corn (or one drained 440g can of corn kernels)

Half of a red onion, finely chopped

Half of a medium red capsicum, finely chopped

Half a bunch of coriander leaves, chopped

Two lightly beaten eggs mixed with 2 Tbsp olive oil

- Add to bowl $\frac{1}{2}$ cup SR flour, seasoned with salt and pepper to taste, and mix thoroughly.
- Add approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ cup milk to make a batter which drops easily from the spoon, but not too thin
- Cook heaped tablespoonsful of mixture in a non-stick pan with a drizzle of olive oil over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes until golden brown underneath and set on top. Turn and brown other side, drain on paper towel while cooking remaining fritters

Mexican Sweet Corn and Bean Rice

1. Slice kernels from **two cobs of sweet corn**, husks and silk removed. Heat **2 tbsp olive oil** in a large frying pan over medium heat. Add **one brown onion**, finely chopped, **2 cloves garlic**, crushed, and **one small red capsicum**, finely chopped, and cook, stirring often for 4-5 minutes until vegetables are soft
2. Add corn kernels and **1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups long grain rice** and stir. Pour over **2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups water** and bring to the boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered 12-15 minutes until rice is tender and liquid is absorbed.
3. Stir in **400g can red kidney beans**, drained and rinsed, **two ripe tomatoes**, chopped, **2 tbsp lime juice** and **$\frac{1}{2}$ cup coriander leaves**, chopped. Stir over medium-low heat until heated through, season to taste with salt and pepper. Spoon into serving bowls, top with a sprinkle of grated cheese and a dollop of sour cream and scatter with chopped avocado to serve

Source: Recipe from Sydney Markets website

Watermelon

Watermelons *Citrullus lanatus var lanatus*, originated in southern Africa, probably in what is now Namibia, and have been cultivated for thousands of years, including by the Egyptians in the 2nd millenium BC. Seeds were found in tombs of pharaohs including of Tutankhamun. The seeds were taken to the New World by European colonists and by African slaves and have been grown in North America since the 1500s and in South America since the 1600s. Old varieties were often bitter, but modern varieties are sweet and juicy and many now have few or no seeds, There are red, pink, orange, yellow and white--fleshed varieties, but most commercially grown types have pink or red flesh. The rind is also edible and can be pickled or used as a vegetable in stir-fries. The seeds of seeded varieties can be roasted and ground into flour. Watermelon has a high sugar content (6.2g/100g) and is low in most nutrients except vitamin C, a 100g serving providing 10% RDI of this important vitamin. As its common name implies, over 90% of the flesh is comprised of water, so a wedge of cool watermelon on a hot day will provide a "drink" as well as a mild sugar hit. A wild variety of

watermelon grows in the Kalahari Desert, where it is known as tsamma. The fruits are used by the San people and by animals for both water and nourishment. Traditionally, travelling in the desert in the dry season could only be done in a good tsamma year. Humans can survive on an exclusive diet of tsamma for six weeks.

Watermelons are tropical or subtropical plants and need temperatures higher than about 25 °C (77 °F) to thrive. On a garden scale, seeds should be sown after the ground has warmed in Spring into well-drained sandy loam with a pH between 5.5 and 7, and medium levels of nitrogen. Aphids, fruit flies and root-knot nematodes attack this crop and if humidity levels are high the plants are prone to plant diseases such as powdery mildew and mosaic virus.

Ways to serve watermelon are many and include fresh, chilled wedges to be eaten alone; frozen cubes or balls to be used as tasty ice cube substitutes; cubes or balls added to a fresh fruit salad, especially good with cherries and blueberries; juiced alone or in combination with other fruits; made into a slushy by crushing the flesh and partially freezing; or used in side dishes such as the following:-

Recipe:

Watermelon and Feta Salad

Combine ¼ watermelon (about 1kg) cut into cubes, small wedges or balls, with 125g crumbled Australian feta cheese (or use 1/2 of a 320g jar of marinated feta), 1-2Tbsp coarsely chopped mint leaves and ¼ cup sliced and pitted black olives. Scatter over 1/3 cup toasted and coarsely chopped walnuts

Serve on a bed of crisp lettuce leaves and sliced Lebanese cucumber then drizzle with a dressing of ¼ cup extra virgin Australian olive oil (or oil reserved from marinated feta), 1 Tblspn lemon zest and 2 Tblspn lemon juice.

For a filling lunch, serve the salad on a bed of cooked brown rice or quinoa.

Watermelon Cooler

A refreshing non-alcoholic drink for hot weather (4 serves)

Blend 400g watermelon cubes (deseeded), with ¼ cup good quality lime cordial until smooth, add 1cup pink grapefruit juice.

Fill 4 tall glasses with ice cubes, divide melon mixture among the glasses, then top up with tonic water

Source: Recipes adapted from Taste.com.au