

ARTICLE

Portland Farmers Market Newsletter Featured Produce Column

Nettles!

Imagine your nice stroll in the woods interrupted by the prickly bite of a stinging nettle. Now imagine eating such a thing! But stinging nettles (*urtica dioica*) are among the wild foods eaten by foraging enthusiasts. Nettles enjoy a long history of consumption by many cultures, including Native Americans, as both food and as a curative for a number of ailments.

Nutrient rich, nettles are packed with protein, iron and vitamins A, C and D, as well as other essential trace minerals. They taste similar to spinach and can be used wherever spinach is called for—in soups, frittatas, lasagna—or just steamed and eaten with butter and lemon. By boiling the nettles prior to sauteeing to add flavor, the nettle water can be enjoyed as a tea.

Nettles have a heart-shaped leaf with scalloped edges and can be found springing up in moist forests in March and April. Though they grow into summer, nettles are best used in spring. Collect the small, new shoots or only the top 8 or 12 inches of taller plants. If eating them is adventure enough for you, check the Portland Farmers Market information booth for vendors who are selling nettles.

Before you dive in, however, stinging nettles are so named for a reason. Whether you are harvesting them in the wild or have purchased them to prepare for cooking, use rubber gloves and scissors. The entire plant is covered in prickly hairs like tiny hypodermic needles. Brush up against the plant and the hairs break off releasing their toxins, one of which is formic acid. The toxins create a rash that might last minutes or a day depending on your sensitivity. With several minutes of cooking, the spiky hairs soften and the toxins that cause the reaction, disappear. A tip from Chef Kathryn LaSusa Yeomans is to turn a bag of nettles into a pot of boiling water. Once the nettles are cooked, you can remove any tougher stems. This way you don't have to handle the nettles at all.

Incidentally, an antidote to the sting of nettles can be found growing nearby in the woods—the dock plant. If at home, try aloe gel to relieve the pain and rash.

If this is starting to sound like too much work, consider that nettles are nature's superfood, outpacing many of its leafy green cousins in terms of nutrients. Besides, this daring culinary feat affords a few bragging rights.



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Artichokes

The Globe artichoke (*cynara scolymus*), according to one myth, gets its Latin name from a story involving a young nymph, Cynara, who had a tryst with Zeus. After a disagreement, Zeus turned Cynara into an artichoke—and we all benefit from her ill-fated romance. Ancient Greeks and Romans considered the artichoke an aphrodisiac and some believed it secured the birth of boys. Catherine de'Medici developed a near obsession with the wonderful thistle and indulged in vast quantities of them.

But despite the long history of the artichoke, its daunting exterior can turn away the less intrepid eaters among us. Once you dive in, however, there is almost no turning back. The grassy, nutty, metallic flavor and the smooth, slippery texture of the leaves are indeed intoxicating. This prickly, grenade-like vegetable is a perennial thistle in the sunflower family. The artichoke itself is the bud of the flower. If allowed to grow, a glorious, purple, spiky flower emerges from the top. There are some 140 known varieties of artichokes.

Artichokes have a number of nutritional benefits. They're high in fiber and also contain a lot of iron, which produces the curious metallic taste. They're also believed to stimulate the liver, purify the blood and help to dissolve kidney and gall stones. Artichokes are believed to be a calmativ; some make a stress-reducing tea from the leaves, or bracts.

But alas, life throws us culinary curveballs. For all the artichoke's delightful qualities, there is one unfortunate drawback. They ruin the flavor of wine due to their metallic taste. One source offers this advice: Where artichokes are fried or part of a frittata or pasta, try a rosé or soft structured white wine. But when more simply prepared, artichokes are best paired with water. If you must drink wine, don't drink your best bottle!

Look for artichokes that are firm, with tightly packed leaves unmarred by brown spots. Artichokes can stay in the refrigerator for a week or longer, but don't wash them until they're ready for use. As you prepare artichokes for any dish, keep them in a bowl of acidulated water—a medium-sized bowl of water with juice of a lemon. This prevents discoloration.

Artichokes can be steamed, fried, grilled, braised, roasted and stuffed. They'll pair beautifully with almost any Spring vegetable: leeks, fava beans, peas, spinach, chard, spring onions, asparagus. They are delightful raw if sliced thinly and dressed with lemon, olive oil and shaved parmesan. Baby artichokes are particularly versatile and entirely edible because they lack the prickly choke.

To prepare any size artichoke, snap off a row or two of the outermost tough leaves. You can eliminate any sharp leaf points with scissors. Then lay the artichoke on its side and cut off the top. For larger artichokes that you plan to add to a dish or stuff, you'll need to dig out the choke—the fuzzy interior—with a spoon. Unless the stem is very long and tough, leave it. It tastes just as good as the heart. Steam a whole artichoke for 30 to 40 minutes (depending on size) testing tenderness by inserting a knife tip into the heart, close to the stem. These can be enjoyed with a sauce of butter, lemon, garlic and a little parsley or mint. Tug the leaves one by one and remove the tender pulp with your teeth till you reach the center. Cut out the fuzzy choke and enjoy your reward—the heart—and your effort.

Try the recipe below, which is a little work, but you will celebrate the short-lived Spring concurrence of favas and artichokes...otherwise you must wait another year.



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Pears

The summer light has faded to a glow. The leaves have begun to change. Pear season is in the air. Homer praised pears as the fruit of the gods. Artists have made pears the subject of many still life paintings. Their alluring shape, perfumed sweetness and versatility makes pears a well-loved fruit.

The pear tree came with the pioneers on the Lewis and Clark Trail and thrived in the Northwest climate. Not only are pears the top tree fruit crop in Oregon but the pear is Oregon's official state fruit. There are over 3,000 known varieties in the world but you'll find about a dozen here in the Northwest. Pears are a wonderful source of fiber and a good source of vitamin C.

Each pear type has its own unique flavor—from earthy sweet to savory sweet to floral sweet. As you roam the market, buy several types and discover your favorites.

Aside from biting into a pear and letting the sweet juice drip down your chin, there is almost nothing you can't do to a pear that you can do to an apple. Pears can be grilled, roasted, pureed, made into jams or chutneys, used in desserts, served on salads, or paired with cheese and wine at the end of a meal. One favorite is pear, gorgonzola and walnut pizza.

Pears are a beautiful match for many cheeses. A cheese monger would be happy to offer suggestions. Steve Jones from Steve's Cheese in NW Portland offered these three pairings to complement most any pear: a blue cheese, a goat's milk tomme, or a medium-aged sheep's milk cheese. Add the perfect wine and you've got a tantalizing trio of flavors. To keep sliced pears from browning, brush the cut surfaces with a fifty-fifty mixture of water and lemon juice.

Fall and winter are the seasons for pears. Unlike most fruits, pears ripen after being picked. They should be firm and allowed to ripen at room temperature. You can tell when they're ripe by pressing gently on the stem end. If it gives a little, the pear is ready to eat. Too ripe, and the flesh will have a mushy, gritty texture.

Serving or cooking with pears can take some planning, as you will likely not find ripe pears in the market. Buy them a few days in advance. If you need to speed up the ripening process, store the pears at room temperature in a paper bag with a banana, which emits a gas that will speed the ripening process. Don't refrigerate an unripe pear. Rather, allow it to ripen at room temperature first.



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Summer Squash

If you've ever grown squash or know someone who has, you're probably familiar with jokes about leaving excess zucchini on someone's doorstep —until it's no longer funny. It should be no surprise then that there are 101 things to do with summer squash —grilled, roasted, fried, sautéed, in soup, frittatas, breads, brownies, and even cocktails!

Abundance, it seems, inspires creativity.

The category of summer squash—unlike their cousins the winter squash—are eaten when immature and the skin is tender. Botanically, squash is a fruit because it contains the seeds of the plant, just like tomatoes. They are relatives of the melon and cucumber, and some varieties have an edible flower, which can be stuffed, fried, sautéed and even eaten raw.

Summer squash are divided into four categories: round, crookneck, scalloped and zucchini (yellow, white and green). Because summer squash types have a similar flavor and texture, they can be substituted for one another or used together. Combining types and colors makes for a lovely presentation, no matter the recipe.

Squash have a very mild flavor and are also high in water content. Because of this, cooking squash relatively dry (as opposed to steaming or boiling) is much preferred, to avoid mushiness. Grilling is the perfect method, requiring little preparation and is an essential addition to a summer barbeque (recipe below). Because of the mild flavor and smooth texture, it's no wonder that squash can be pureed to a smooth consistency for soup, made into a slushy cocktail or used in desserts. Squash even benefits from long cooking as the flavor intensifies and the sugars caramelize to a rich brown color.

Summer squash are a good source of protein, vitamins A, K, and C, manganese and magnesium, as well as a number of other nutrients. They're also an excellent source dietary fiber. The rind of summer squash contains beta-carotene, but not the insides. So, because the skin is tender and edible, it's best to leave it on.



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