

## Extension Notes

### Family and Consumer Sciences

THERESA G HOWARD  
Harlan County Extension Office

## PICK HERBS FOR HEALTH

Celebrity chefs say people eat with their eyes first. Then, they serve up a deliciously crafted work of art on a plate. It may be true, but most of us use our senses of smell and taste to satisfy hunger.

Lots of people turn to salt as a fast flavor-fix for food. Table salt is 40-percent sodium, which is an important mineral for the human body. Problems arise when salt is overused, especially as a flavor substitute in bland foods and low-fat recipes. Excessive sodium in the diet is linked to high blood pressure, which can result in heart disease, kidney failure and stroke. Even though salt serves as the major source of sodium in the diet, the recommended maximum daily intake is just 2,400 milligrams or about 1 teaspoon.

Culinary herbs also enhance the flavor of food without the associated health concerns. They come in several forms; fresh, dried or ground. Volatile oils in fresh herbs are released into food as flavor and scent when chopped or cooked. Drying fresh herbs, especially in whole leaf form, concentrates these oils. Powdered or ground herbs initially release the highest flavor concentration but often have a shorter shelf life than dried herbs. A good rule of thumb is 1 tablespoon of fresh is equal to 1 teaspoon of dried or ¼ teaspoon of ground herb. When using dried herbs, rub the ingredient between your palms first to release volatile oils, and then add to food.

Here are a few common herbs and suggestions for cooking with them.

**Basil** is widely used in southern European cuisines. It pairs especially well with fish, shellfish, eggs, vegetables and tomato-based dishes. Basil is an easy to grow annual available in many varieties and flavors. Italian basil is the kind most often found in dried and ground form at grocery stores. Basil retains good flavor when dried but loses depth when compared to fresh.

**Oregano** also is popular in southern European cooking and is considered essential to Italian cuisine. Use it to enhance tomato sauces, soups, salad dressings and bean and vegetable dishes. Drying brings out the best flavor and you can usually find oregano in this form. A perennial in most gardens, it is easy to grow once established. A good choice for growers is True Greek Oregano.

**Parsley** offers more than a garnish for the plate. This leafy herb has a distinct “green vegetable” flavor which punches up just about any dish. Parsley is especially popular in soups. Common species include flat-leaf parsley and curled leaf parsley. Parsley becomes bland and almost flavorless when dried, so use it fresh or freeze small quantities for cooking later. A self-seeding annual, parsley is fairly easy to grow but does best in cool weather and partial shade.

**Thyme** is an aromatic herb with widespread use in cooking. This woody herb contains high levels of volatile oils which means a little bit goes a long way. Thyme pairs well with poultry, seafood, beans, vegetable dishes and salad dressings. A perennial except in the coldest climates, thyme can be fussy when grown as a plant. Its many benefits for home cooks make it worth the trouble. Thyme retains good flavor when dried.

When using an herb for the first time, start with a small amount to find out if you like it. Here is a simple taste test. Combine ½ cup butter with 1 tablespoon minced fresh herb and let it sit for two hours to allow the flavors to mix. Spread on crackers or warm bread.

You can have fun experimenting with herbs and they can help you unload some of the high-salt, high-fat content in your diet.

Educational programs of the Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability or national origin.