Flavor Food with Healthful Herbs
By Janet Hackert; Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Many people are preparing their gardens for flowers and vegetables. It’s also the time to prepare to grow herbs indoors or out. With an herb garden or containers on a patio, flavoring food with healthful herbs can be so handy.

Fresh herbs can add health benefits along with flavor. For example, a quarter cup of basil has about a third of the Vitamin K needed in a day. Basil also has beta-carotene, a precursor to Vitamin A. Its oil is an antimicrobial and according to the August 2013 issue of Tufts Health and Nutrition Letter, has been studied as an anti-inflammatory as well.

A quarter cup may seem like a lot of basil, if one is accustomed to just a pinch or a sprinkle of basil in spaghetti sauce, but basil can be made into a pesto sauce by pureeing it with garlic, olive oil, walnuts and a little parmesan cheese. To keep the sauce’s bright green color, Tufts recommends adding four teaspoons of lemon juice per two cups of the mix, or blanch leaves for 30 seconds in boiling water then cool quickly in ice water. It can be used as a topping for pasta, pizza, veggies, fish or anything needing a sauce. Basil can also be used to make a bruschetta with lots of tomatoes, basil, and garlic in some vinegar and oil. Fresh basil leaves also make a tasty addition to a green salad.

Other herbs that are a source of Vitamin K include cilantro, oregano, parsley, sage and thyme. Many herbs also contain beta-carotene, including cilantro, mint, parsley, and tarragon. Several have been tested for their antibacterial or antimicrobial properties, including dill, lemon verbena, oregano, and thyme. Chives and mint also are a source of Vitamin C.

Using herbs fresh keeps many of the nutrients intact. The heat of the drying process can reduce some of the healthful effects. Either way, dried or fresh, fresh herbs add flavor and are a healthy alternative to excess salt.

University of Missouri Extension has a guide called Growing Herbs at Home that can help in planting, caring for, harvesting, storing and preserving herbs. Ask for the guide, Growing Herbs at Home G6470 at your local MU Extension office or go online to http://extension.missouri.edu and type the title in the search.

For more information on using herbs and their health benefits, or any other topic, contact me at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

(Written 4/4/2014)