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Plants on Your Plate-Spinach

What image comes to mind when you hear the word 'spinach'? Is it the bright green leafy salad so popular on springtime menus or a dark green stringy mass that appeared on your school lunch tray or dinner plate at grandma's house? Unfortunately, the latter was my only exposure to spinach as a child, so you can imagine my skepticism, as a young adult, when encouraged to try the spinach salad (with fruit in it no less) at a ladies luncheon held at a quaint tearoom. Ahh...I still had so much to learn!

Originating in Persia, spinach made its way to Spain around the 11th century and the rest of Europe during the 15th century. Early colonists brought it to America and spinach became a commonly used vegetable in the United States by the early 19th century. Cookbooks of that era would give instructions for cooking spinach for 25 minutes, hence, the dark green mass that I preferred to avoid.

There are three basic types of spinach, Savoy, semi-Savoy and flat leaf. Savoy, also called curly leaf spinach, has large, very dark crinkly leaves and is better suited for cooking. Semi-savoy is very similar, but the leaves tend to be smaller and still somewhat crisp and crinkly. Flat leaf, which is the most popular in the United States, has smooth, tender, spade shaped leaves with a slightly sweet flavor. This is the most popular variety for raw uses like salads and smoothies. Baby spinach is flat leaf spinach picked in the early stages of growth.

As a quick maturing, cool season leafy green, spinach is often one of the first garden gems to harvest in early spring. A member of the Amaranthaceae family, this leafy annual is a 'cousin' to beets, chard, and quinoa. Spinach ranks as one of the most nutrient-dense of all foods. At just 7 calories per uncooked cup, it is an excellent source of folate, and vitamins A, C, E, K, and B-6. Spinach is also a good source of iron, magnesium, riboflavin and potassium. This vast array of nutrients provide many benefits including reducing risk of heart disease and cancer and promoting eye health, wound healing, healthy blood pressure and protection from neural tube defects in a developing fetus. It is worth mentioning that the iron found in spinach is non-heme iron, which needs a high vitamin C helper such as citrus foods or strawberries. (Now that first spinach salad makes sense!) As healthful as spinach is, there are potential adverse effects, especially when consumed in large amounts. Because of the high vitamin K, it can interfere with blood thinning medication and clotting ability. In addition, the high levels of oxalic acid and calcium salts can interfere with mineral absorption and contribute to kidney stones in people who are at risk for developing them.

As an adult, I may still politely pass when it comes to a plain vegetable side dish, especially if it resembles what I experienced in my early days. However, I have learned to enjoy spinach in a variety of ways...in a salad, in pasta dishes, in omelets and even a breakfast smoothie, like the recipe below. One thing I have learned is that I prefer blueberries or a berry blend, so that the darker purple colors can 'win' over the green of the spinach!

Berries and Greens Smoothie

½ cup 100% cranberry juice
½ cup vanilla yogurt
1 cup fresh spinach, packed
½ ripe banana (try freezing first)
½ cup frozen berry blend (blueberry, blackberry, strawberry)
¼ teaspoon ground ginger

Combine all ingredients in blender and blend until smooth.

Nutrition information (1 serving): Calories: 223, Total Fat: 2g, Saturated Fat: 1.5g, Sodium: 128mg, Carbohydrates: 41g, Fiber: 5g, Protein: 9g

Recipe adapted from Seasonal and Simple, analyzed by verywellfit.com



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