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Plants on Your Plate

Pumpkin

We carve them into jack-o-lanterns and make lots of pie, but the versatility of the pumpkin goes far beyond these common uses. From muffins to soups, adding pumpkin can give a boost of nutrition a variety of recipes.

This bright orange member of the squash family is loaded with an important antioxidant, beta-carotene. Beta-carotene is one of the plant carotenoids, that, when converted to vitamin A in the body, performs many important functions in overall health. When beta-carotene is mentioned, we often think of eye health, and rightfully so, as Vitamin A is key to how the retina absorbs and process light. Current research also indicates that a diet rich in foods containing beta-carotene may reduce the risk of developing certain types of cancer and offers protection against heart disease. Beta-carotene offers protection against other diseases, as well as some degenerative aspects of aging. As a high fiber vegetable, pumpkin also helps to lend a feeling of fullness and satiety, and aids in maintaining digestive health.

It's important to remember that the pumpkin you choose for a jack-o-lantern won't be the best pumpkin for cooking. When selecting a pumpkin for cooking, look for a "pie pumpkin" or "sweet pumpkin." These are smaller than the typical jack-o-lantern pumpkins and the flesh is sweeter and less watery.

Look for a pumpkin with 1 to 2 inches of stem left. If the stem is cut down too low the pumpkin will decay quickly. Avoid pumpkins with blemishes and soft spots. It should feel heavy and shape is unimportant, so a lopsided pumpkin is not necessarily a bad pumpkin. Figure one pound of raw, untrimmed pumpkin for each cup finished pumpkin puree.

To prepare your pumpkin, start by removing the stem with a sharp knife and cut pumpkin in half. Scoop out the seeds and scrape away all of the stringy mass. This is a messy job, so work on a newspaper covered surface for an easy clean-up. Separate the seeds for roasting for a tasty snack. Remove any pulp from the seeds with several cold water rinses and drain on paper towels. Toss seeds with a small amount of olive oil and season with your favorite spice...I like garlic powder and cumin. Roast on a foil covered pan at 250 degrees for 30-45 minutes, stirring every 15 minutes. Pumpkins seeds are a tasty, high fiber snack.

Oven roasting is a common and easy way to prepare pumpkin and I feel that it really brings out the flavor. Place pumpkin, cut side down on a foil lined pan at 350 degrees for one hour or until fork tender. When the pumpkin is cool enough to handle, remove the peel using a small sharp knife and your fingers. Put the peeled pumpkin in a food processor and puree or use a food mill, ricer, strainer or potato masher to form a puree.

Pumpkin puree freezes well for later use. Measure cooled puree into one cup portions, place in ridged freezer containers, leaving 1/2-inch headspace or pack into zip closure bags. Label, date and freeze at 0°F for up to one year.

If you are considering canning pumpkin, it can only be canned in cubed form and not pureed, due to product density. Pumpkin must be pressure canned, as it is a low acid vegetable. For complete canning instructions, visit the National Center for Home Food Preservation website at: <https://nchfp.uga.edu/tips/fall/pumpkins.html>

The pumpkin is the inspiration for all kinds of seasonal spicy concoctions, often on the sweeter side of the spectrum. Consider this savory recipe as a way to give a nutrition boost to another fall favorite...chili. You'll never even know it's there!

Pumpkin Chili

Makes 8 (1 cup) servings

Ingredients

2 teaspoons olive oil
1 small yellow onion (chopped)
1 green bell pepper (cored, seeded and chopped)
2 jalapeño peppers (seeded and finely chopped)
2 cloves garlic (finely chopped or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder)
1 pound ground turkey
1 can (14.5 oz) crushed tomatoes
1 can (15 oz) pumpkin puree (or 2 cups frozen)
1 cup water
1 tablespoon chili powder
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
salt and pepper (to taste, optional)
1 can kidney beans (or other beans if desired)

Directions

1. Heat oil in a large pot over medium high heat.
2. Add onion, bell pepper, jalapenos, and garlic and cook, stirring frequently until tender, about 5 minutes.
3. Add turkey and cook until browned.
4. Add tomatoes, pumpkin, water, chili powder, cumin, paprika, salt and pepper and bring to a boil.
5. Reduce heat to medium low then add beans.
6. Cover and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 30 minutes more.
7. Ladle chili into bowls and serve.

Calories: 193, Total Fat: 8 g, Saturated Fat: 2 g, Cholesterol: 41mg, Sodium: 242mg, Total Carbohydrate: 17 g, Dietary Fiber: 6 g, Total Sugars: 5 g

Recipe adapted from the USDA Mixing Bowl.



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