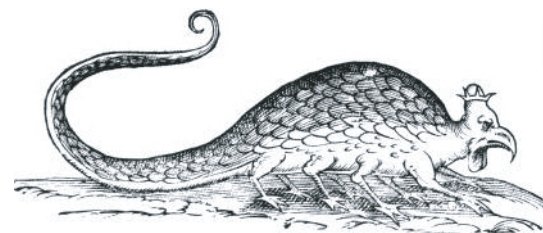


# BETTER KNOW YOUR VEGETABLES

## *This Week ... Basil*

Basil is a member of the mint family native to central and tropical Asia and Africa (some think specifically to India). Today it's grown and eaten around the world and features most prominently in Italian and South Asian cuisine.



*Basil was the cure for a bite by the fearsome basilisk.*

The internet, that treasure trove of miscellany both true and false, has these choice tidbits to offer about basil's strange place in ritual and culture around the world:

- The word stems from the Greek *basileus*, meaning king. In ancient times it may have been used by royalty as an unguent, bath, or medicine. Other early sources link basil to misfortune. Poverty was personified as a ragged old woman with a basil plant.
- Roman farmers uttered obscenities during sowing in order to ensure a healthy crop, which supposedly explains the origin of the French phrase *semer le basilic*, "to rant."
- According to the Romans, only basil could cure the bite of the basilisk, a winged serpentine creature with the head of a chicken. The basilisk's breath and withering glance were also thought to be fatal! (An interesting aside: Scientists today are studying basil's antiviral characteristics and its potential for regulating blood sugar in diabetics after hundreds of years of use in folk remedies.)
- Medieval Europeans thought that a handful of basil leaves left to sit under a vessel could spontaneously generate scorpions. Others took it one step further, warning that simply smelling the plant would cause scorpions to grow in the brain.
- In Tudor England, farmers' wives gave plants to visitors as parting gifts.
- In some parts of Italy, basil is considered a token of one's love.
- In Moldavia, it was thought that a man would fall in love with the woman from whom he accepts a sprig of basil.
- And in Mexico, old wives say it can keep a man's eye from wandering.

## RECIPES

### BASIL BUTTERMILK DRESSING

*From Epicurious.com*

Makes about 1 cup

1 small garlic clove  
Rounded 1/4 teaspoon salt  
2/3 cup well-shaken buttermilk  
1/3 cup mayonnaise  
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh basil

Mince garlic and mash to a paste with salt using a large heavy knife. Whisk together buttermilk, mayonnaise, basil, and garlic paste in a small bowl. Chill, covered, 1 hour to allow flavors to develop.

### PESTO

*From The Silver Spoon*

Serves 4

25 fresh basil leaves  
Scant 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil  
1/3 cup pine nuts  
1 cup Parmesan cheese, freshly grated  
1/3 cup romano cheese, freshly grated  
Salt

Put the basil leaves in a food processor with the olive oil, pine nuts, and a pinch of salt. Process briefly at medium speed. Add the grated cheeses and process again. Serve with asparagus, egg dishes, spaghetti, or gnocchi.

### BASIL GRANITA WITH PEACHES

*From MarthaStewart.com*

Serves 6

2 cups loosely packed fresh basil leaves, plus sprigs and flowers for garnish  
1 cup sugar  
1 1/2 cups fresh honeydew juice (from 1 1/4 pounds honeydew)  
1/4 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice, or verjuice  
1/4 teaspoon coarse sea salt  
2 peaches, halved lengthwise, pitted, and thinly sliced

Prepare an ice-water bath; set aside. Bring a medium saucepan of water to a boil. Add basil; cook until basil turns bright green, about 30 seconds. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to ice-water bath until cool, about 1 minute. Drain; pat dry.

Stir together sugar and 1 cup water in a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring constantly, until sugar has dissolved. Add basil. Reduce heat; simmer 5 minutes. Remove pan from heat; let cool completely.

Puree the basil mixture in a blender, about 1 minute. Transfer to a large bowl. Stir in honeydew juice. Refrigerate, covered, 8 to 12 hours.

Using the back of a spoon, press basil mixture through a fine sieve into a nonreactive bowl. Stir in lemon juice and salt. Transfer to an 8-inch square nonreactive baking dish, and place in freezer. Rake with a fork every 30 minutes until mixture is completely frozen, about 3 hours.

Arrange peaches on 6 chilled serving plates, dividing evenly; top with granita. Garnish with basil sprigs and flowers.