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A Salad Lover's Guide to Greens

The meal of the diet-conscious populace may well be the salad. Practically no other dish consistently offers so many vitamins and minerals, fiber and variety. Plus, a well-prepared salad can inspire a main course, or become one.

When it comes to making salads, there are some tricks of the trade worth knowing, as we've outlined below.

Buying and storing

In general, the darker the leaf, the better it is for you. Best example: Romaine lettuce has six times as much vitamin C and eight times as much beta-carotene as iceberg lettuce.

For optimum freshness, greens should be kept cold. Your supermarket should have them displayed in refrigerated or iced racks.

Look over the greens before you buy. The leaves should be bright green and crisp. Watch out for heads with leaves that are wilted, decayed, bruised or brown along the edges. Greens should also have a fresh, clean smell.

Store greens, unwashed, in a perforated plastic bag in the crisper drawer of your refrigerator for up to one week.

Don't throw the outer leaves away -- these are the greenest and most nutritious.

Perfect salad technique

Gently rinse greens to remove sand or dirt. Soaking greens in a bowl of water can remove vitamin C and other water-soluble vitamins.

When using greens in a salad, ensure maximum crispness by drying the leaves after washing. Use a salad spinner or wrap the leaves in a clean, lint-free dishtowel and refrigerate until ready to use.

For optimum nutrition and flavor, mix a variety of compatible greens: red leaf lettuce and spinach leaves, for example.

Add thinly chopped or sliced carrots, tomatoes, mushrooms, cucumbers or green or yellow onions.

Choose a dressing that complements your salad and accompanying dishes. Be sure the dressing is well-chilled before using.

Use dressing sparingly. Pour on too much, and you're left with soggy leaves and an overload of fat. Rule of thumb: Use 1 tablespoon or less per person. To avoid wilted leaves, add dressing just before serving.

Tasteful extras

For added interest, use a variety of oils in your dressings. Flavored oils -- such as walnut, hazelnut, sesame, avocado, peanut and virgin olive oil -- have the same calorie and fat content as safflower or corn oil. Because of their richer flavor, however, you may end up using less.

While you're at it, add a few flavored vinegars to your pantry. Ones to try: balsamic, red wine, tarragon, rosemary or raspberry.

Fresh or dried herbs -- such as basil, tarragon, dill, sage and cilantro -- add flavor, but no fat, to dressings. The zest of lemons, limes or oranges makes a nice change of pace.

Mustard can add flavor and a smooth texture to your dressings with a minimum of calories and very little fat.

Green nutrition

A salad a day might well keep the doctor away, because a diet heavy in greens can help supply your daily intake of several important vitamins and minerals. Men should get 900 micrograms of vitamin A each day, and women should get 700 micrograms, according to the federal Institute of Medicine. Both men and women should get 60 mg a day of vitamin C. For calcium, both men and women should consume 1,000 to 1,300 mg of calcium. For iron, the daily requirements are 8 mg for men and postmenopausal women, and 18 mg for pre-menopausal women.

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