

Strawberry Season

It's time for strawberries! Whether you grow your own, pick from a local farm, or purchase them in the grocery store, now is the time to think about how you might use these fresh tasty morsels.

The strawberry, a member of the rose family, has been enjoyed for thousands of years. Strawberries grew wild in Italy as early as 234 BC. American Indians were already eating strawberries when the Colonists arrived. The crushed berries were often mixed with cornmeal and baked into strawberry bread. The Colonists developed their own version of the recipe and strawberry shortcake was created. In ancient lore, strawberries were regarded as an aphrodisiac, probably because they are heart-shaped.

Strawberries are unique in that their seeds grow on the outside. When my children were very young, they loved the taste of strawberries but didn't care for the seeds. In fact, my daughter used to beg me to peel her strawberries! No wonder, since one average strawberry has about 200 seeds on it.

There are still places where you can find tiny, sweet, deep red, wild strawberries but the ones we know best are the big, bright red, juicy strawberries. They are available almost year-round in the supermarket, but the local crops will be ready soon.

Nutritionally, one cup of unsweetened berries contains only 50 calories, 3 grams fiber, and more than the recommended daily allowance for Vitamin C.

If you decide to pick your own strawberries season, here are some "picking tips."

- Wear comfortable, washable clothes that will protect your knees.
- Morning is the best time to pick strawberries. Picked berries lose freshness quickly in heat.
- Bring several large, flat containers, so berries won't smash. The best containers are not more than 5 inches high. (Some farms furnish containers but call ahead to make sure.)
- Place freshly picked berries in the shade to maintain freshness.

Whether you do the picking or let someone else have the fun, choose plump strawberries that feel firm with bright red color and a natural looking shine. They will not ripen after picking, so avoid strawberries that have green or white patches. Remember that while the huge strawberries are impressive to look at, medium or small sizes are generally more flavorful.

Depending on how you will use or preserve the berries, you may wonder how many to pick. Due to the many variables, such as moisture content, size, and variety, it is difficult to quantify equivalents, but in general two pounds of fresh berries will yield about one quart of sliced berries or about two cups mashed berries for jam.

Take the berries home immediately after purchase or picking. Plan to use them as quickly as possible, within two or three days. If you need to store them, remove the berries from their market or store container. Gently sort the berries, and arrange them in a single layer on a cookie sheet or other shallow container. Leave the caps on until you are ready to use them. Store them in the refrigerator immediately. Avoid storing strawberries in plastic bags, since moisture is an enemy of fresh berries.

Just before serving, wash them in gently flowing cold water in a colander. Drain and remove caps by giving them an easy twist with a strawberry huller or sharp knife.

Some favorite ways to use strawberries, besides eating fresh and plain, are sprinkled on cereal, sliced onto pancakes and waffles, or in smoothies.

Smoothies are a flavorful method to eat either frozen or fresh strawberries, and here are many ways to make them. Keep in mind a large blender jar that is fairly wide at the bottom may need a larger amount of ingredients to adequately blend the ingredients. Making a double serving should provide enough volume to yield the desired consistency. You can freeze the extra smoothie to enjoy later as a "smoothie pop."

Strawberry Cooler

Place 12-15 frozen berries in a blender with 1-cup milk and 1 teaspoon sugar.

Blend about 30 seconds.

Makes 1 serving.

Strawberry Yogurt Shake

1/2 cup un-sweetened pineapple juice

3/4 cup plain low-fat yogurt

1-1/2 cups frozen, un-sweetened strawberries

1 teaspoon granulated sugar

Add ingredients, in order listed, to blender container.

Puree at medium speed, until thick and smooth.

Makes 2 servings

Nutritional Analysis Per Serving: Calories, 136; Fiber, 2.6 g; Cholesterol, 4 mg; Sodium, 63 mg.

Strawberry Smoothie

1 cup unsweetened frozen or fresh strawberries

1 teaspoon coarsely chopped mint leaves

1/2 cup 100% orange juice

1/2 cup low-fat vanilla yogurt

Place the strawberries, mint leaves, orange juice and yogurt in your blender jar. Blend until thick and smooth. Garnish with additional mint leaves.

Strawberry-Rhubarb Pie

Make pastry for two-crust 9" pie.

1 1/3 cup sugar

1/3 cup flour

3 cups rhubarb, cut into 1" cubes

3 cups fresh strawberries, sliced

1-1/2 tablespoons butter (optional)

1 tablespoon lemon juice

Heat oven to 425° F. Mix sugar and flour together and mix into rhubarb and berries. Pour into uncooked pastry shell. Dot with butter. Cover with top crust. Seal and flute the edge. Cut slats into top crust. Bake 15 minutes at 425° F, reduce heat to 375°F and continue baking 30-40 minutes or until crust is browned, juice begins to bubble, and rhubarb is tender. Serve slightly warm.

Strawberry Bread

4 eggs

1 cup salad oil

2 cups sugar

Dash of salt

3 teaspoons cinnamon

1 teaspoon soda

3-1/2 cups flour

3 cups pureed strawberries or 2 10-ounce boxes
frozen strawberries

1 cup chopped nuts (optional)

Mix everything together in order given. Pour into two well greased 9x5x3-inch pans. Bake at 350°F about 1 hour and 15 minutes, or until done.

Strawberry Rhubarb Crisp

2 cups rhubarb, sliced
1 cup strawberries, sliced
1/3 cup sugar
1 tablespoon flour

Topping:
1/3 cup quick cooking oatmeal
2 tablespoons flour
2 tablespoons packed brown sugar
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
1-2 tablespoons butter or margarine

Combine sliced fruit, sugar and flour. Place in a greased baking pan. Combine topping, mix until crumbly. Sprinkle mixture over fruit. Bake at 350°F for 30-40 minutes.

Microwave Directions: Make sure to use a microwave safe dish. Combine fruit and sugar as above, place filling in a dish. Cover and cook 5 minutes, stirring at least once. Follow instructions for topping, sprinkle over fruit and microwave, uncovered, for 2 to 3 minutes.

Fruit Parfait

1/2 cup strawberries, sliced
1/2 cup apples, chopped
1 banana, sliced
1/2 cup low-fat vanilla yogurt
1/2 cup low-fat granola or crunchy whole-grain cereal

Layer the ingredients in a small glass bowl, or two dessert dishes in this order: half the fruit, half the granola, all of the yogurt, remaining fruit, remaining granola.

Makes 2 servings.

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