

Did You Know?



Sweet Basil, *Ocimum basilicum*

- Basil is in the Lamiaceae or mint family. There are about 64 species in the genus *Ocimum*. Sweet Basil, *Ocimum basilicum* is the most common culinary form used in the United States.
- *O. basilicum* varieties have a diverse range of fragrance, flavor, size, growth habit and even color. Favorite culinary varieties include sweet, specialty fragrant (cinnamon, lemon, lime, and Thai/anise). There are large, medium, and small leaved varieties, including columnar, miniature, globe, or bush types. Some varieties are variegated, purple, speckled and have green, red, or purple flowers. Culinary uses are just as diverse as they include sweet and savory dishes from around the world.
- Basil seeds form visible seed coats when exposed to moisture. Place a drop or two of warm water on a basil seed and watch the gelatinous seed coat form.
- Harvest either 2-4" or as much as the 2/3 of the growth at a time. Harvest frequently by cutting the stems to just above a leaf node to keep the plant healthy, prevent flowering and supply your culinary needs.
- The essential oils derived from *Ocimum basilicum* (sweet basil) and *O. gratissimum* (tree basil) are used in commercial insect repellents. Sweet basil oil is also used in perfumes and colognes.
- The different fragrances of basil come from the presence of essential oils produced in epidermal gland cells on the leaves. The variation in flavor and fragrance among the different basil species is due to the different percentages present of up to 100 different chemical constituents and compounds.
- The name basil comes from the Greek word "basileus" or "king". It is also attributed to the word "basilisk" a legendary dragon who could slay a person with just one glance.
- Romans on the other hand, believed the fragrance of basil stimulated love. Women seeking true love merely had to hand a sprig of it to their intended and he would be forever hers. Italian men used basil in courtship as well, signaling matrimonial intent by wearing a sprig in their hair.
- In the Middle Ages, basil was thought to create scorpions!
- Historical medicinal uses vary across cultures. Uses have included remedies for colds, warts, melancholy, and scorpion and bee stings. Though Dioscorides', the Greek physician, pharmacologist and botanist, warned that too much basil "dulleth the sight" and is hard on digestion.
- In the Victorian language of flowers, it symbolizes both hatred (common basil) and best wishes (sweet basil). In short, basil has such varied associations including opposites like love and hate, danger and protection and life and death.

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