



# Basil!

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**B**asil is known as the “royal herb” by the ancient Greeks because of its rich aroma. Basil is an herb that has been used in many cultures throughout history to add flavor to food. Basil offers a wide variety of flavors, including clove, citrus, cinnamon and licorice, depending on the variety.

## Growing

Basil typically is 12 to 24 inches tall with small, dark green leaves. Basil can be grown indoors by a sunny window in about four to six weeks.

To grow basil indoors, plant seeds in a nutrient-rich soil and a container that allows for drainage. The soil should be kept moist but never soggy.

To plant basil outside, wait until the temperature of the soil is about 70 F. Basil grows well in warm weather with plenty of water and lots of sun, about six to eight hours per day.

Plant seeds/seedlings about ¼ inch deep and 10 to 12 inches apart. Water frequently if the weather is dry. Placing woodchips around the base of the plant also helps hold in moisture.

## Harvesting

After the plant is mature with several leaves on it, you can begin to harvest the leaves as you need them. Basil grows better and will produce more leaves if they are picked often.

Never pick the plant bare or the plant will die. Only pick about three-fourths of the leaves at a time. When the plant gets older and starts to grow flowers, be sure to pick the flower heads off as soon as you notice them. This will make the plant put more of its energy into producing leaves rather than flowers. If the plant flowers, the flavor of the leaves change.

## Storage

Always rinse basil under running water and pat dry after harvesting and before storing it to avoid any contamination. Once harvested, basil can be kept in an airtight plastic bag in the refrigerator for three to five days. Use the basil right away or freeze what you do not need because basil loses its flavor with time.

## Preparation

Basil most commonly is used fresh in recipes. In general, it is added at the last moment because cooking lessens the flavor of the leaves.

Note that if you are substituting dry basil for fresh in a recipe, use only one-third of the amount of dry basil as fresh. Dried herbs have a higher concentration of flavor than fresh.

## Preservation

Basil can be preserved by freezing or drying.

- **Freezing:** To freeze basil, first remove the stems and blanch the leaves in water for three seconds. Then dry the basil with a paper towel and separate leaves to put into a freezer-tight bag. Another way to freeze basil is to puree it and put it into an ice cube tray. Then cover the tray and freeze.

*Learn more about freezing vegetables in the NDSU Extension publication “Freezing Vegetables” (FN187).*

- **Drying:** Drying basil is not the best option because the flavor of the herb changes dramatically. If you choose to dry, separate each leaf with the stems removed. If using a food dehydrator, follow the manufacturer’s instructions. Leaves are done when they are completely dry and crumbly. After leaves are dry and cool, place them in an airtight container and store for up to one year.

*Learn more about other methods of drying herbs in the NDSU Extension publication “Harvesting Herbs for Healthy Eating” (H1267).*



## Nutrition

Basil is an herb, so it has very small amounts of energy and nutrients, but it does provide a small amount of vitamin A. Basil flavors food without adding salt to recipes

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# Recipes

## Key to abbreviations

c. = cup	g = gram	oz. = ounce
tsp. = teaspoon	mg = milligram	lb. = pound
Tbsp. = tablespoon	kg = kilogram	



## Basil and Watermelon-infused Water

1 c. cubed watermelon    1 quart water  
3 basil leaves

Place watermelon and basil in water and chill in refrigerator for two hours.

Makes about four (1 cup) servings. Each serving has 10 calories, 0 g fat, 0 g protein, 3 g carbohydrate, 0 g fiber and 10 mg sodium.



## Basil Pesto

4 oz. pine nuts  
4 c. fresh basil  
3 garlic cloves  
1 c. grated Parmesan cheese  
1 Tbsp. lemon zest  
1 tsp. lemon juice  
1 c. olive oil  
¼ tsp. salt  
⅛ tsp. ground pepper

Add the pine nuts to a small skillet over medium heat and toast until golden brown. In the bowl of a food processor, add half the pine nuts, 3 cups basil, 2 garlic cloves, ½ cup cheese and lemon zest. Process the ingredients on lowest setting. Slowly drizzle in ¾ cup of olive oil and continue processing until a smooth paste begins to form. Stop the food processor and scrape down the sides of the bowl. Add the remaining pine nuts, basil, garlic, cheese, olive oil and lemon juice to the bowl. Pulse the ingredients until finely chopped. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Makes 32 (1 tablespoon) servings. Each serving has 100 calories, 10 g fat, 2 g protein, 1 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber and 75 mg sodium.



## Rustic Tomato Basil Soup

2½ lb. fresh, ripe tomatoes, halved  
4 Tbsp. olive oil  
½ Tbsp. salt  
1 tsp. black pepper, plus more to taste  
2 medium onions, chopped  
10 garlic cloves, chopped  
2 (14.5-oz.) cans fire roasted tomatoes with juices  
3 c. fresh basil leaves, lightly packed  
2 tsp. dried oregano  
6 c. unsalted vegetable stock  
1 tsp. sugar, depending on sweetness of tomatoes

Preheat oven to 400 F. In a large rimmed sheet pan, combine the tomatoes, 2 tablespoons of olive oil, salt and pepper. Roast in an even layer for 45 to 60 minutes. While tomatoes are roasting, in a heavy large pot, sauté onions in olive oil for one minute. Add garlic and sauté another minute. Add the fire-roasted tomatoes with juices, fresh basil, oregano and vegetable stock. Stir to combine well. Add your oven-roasted tomatoes (and any liquid that may be on baking sheet) and bring to a low boil. Boil for 30 minutes uncovered. Use an immersion blender to puree soup until desired texture. Add 1 teaspoon of sugar to taste, if needed. Add additional salt and/or black pepper as needed.

Makes 12 (1 cup) servings. Each serving has 100 calories, 5 g fat, 2 g protein, 12 g carbohydrate, 2 g fiber and 510 mg sodium.



## Margherita Pizza

1 pizza dough    ⅛ tsp. salt  
5 Tbsp. basil pesto    2 Tbsp. fresh basil,  
1 c. shredded mozzarella    shredded or finely  
2 to 3 tomatoes, sliced    chopped  
1 Tbsp. olive oil

Prepare homemade or store-bought pizza dough per instructions. Preheat oven to 425 F. Shape the dough onto a lightly greased pizza or sheet pan, spread the pesto on the dough, then top with shredded mozzarella and sliced tomatoes. Drizzle with a tablespoon of olive oil and salt. Bake for approximately 10 to 12 minutes or until crust is baked and cheese is melted. Top with basil just before serving.

Makes eight servings. Each serving has 250 calories, 13 g fat, 9 g protein, 25 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber and 540 mg sodium.

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