

## The Star-Ledger

### The birds and the basil

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For the Star-Ledger

To my great dismay, the birds in my neighborhood have good taste.

Eager to jump-start my kitchen garden, I recently planted a trio of basil seedlings -- a bargain at \$1.49. Just days after putting them in, I reaped a nifty dividend from my modest investment when I gathered a few leaves to flavor a pot of tomato sauce.

But when I stepped out to check on the plants' progress the following day, they were gone, apparently decimated by a flock of feathered fiends that flew into the branches of a nearby shrub at my approach. Apparently even hungrier for a taste of summer than I, those dastardly birds had snipped the plants right down to soil level. Not a leaf in sight.

Ron Binaghi, Jr., of Stokes Farm in Old Tappan, who grows a cornucopia of herbs for sale at several New York City greenmarkets, laughed when I told him my tale. "Maybe they're Italian birds," he chuckled.

With a tradition of embellishing tomato sauce, insalata caprese (the tricolor composition of sliced tomato, mozzarella and basil made famous on the island of Capri), and, of course, the delectable basil-olive oil-pine nut-and Parmesan concoction known as pesto, Italians certainly appreciate the taste and versatility of this aromatic herb. According to Rick Van Vranken, agricultural agent for the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County, "the majority of fresh market basil growers are still growing the Italian large-leaf type of sweet basil." Just like the kind I'd planted in my garden.

In terms of sales, "nothing's even close to that stuff. People are used to it and it has a great flavor," said Binaghi. Other types of basil, varying in color, leaf shape, and aroma, do abound, appealing to adventurous cooks. "Thai basil has an anise-like taste, the dark color of opal basil looks nice, and lemon basil is very lemony," said Ron Gassaway, vegetable manager at Delicious Orchards in Colts Neck. Some customers seek out the tiny-leaved but potent basil known as bush or fino basil, added Binaghi. But of the less common varieties, opal is the most popular, probably because of its attractive purple leaves, he added. A good way to taste test them is to make like a bird and snip a few leaves -- right into a tossed green salad.

Part of the cook's pantry since at least 400 B.C., basil is native to India, southeast Asia, and northeast Africa. It is rarely consumed in Hindu households, however, for the herb is considered sacred to Krishna and Vishnu.

Its cultivation spread throughout the Mediterranean and one explanation for its name is that it derives from the Greek word for "king," basileus. Another is less palatable -- that it comes from the basilisk, a mythological creature that could kill with a single breath or look.

In ancient times people believed that the plant could propagate scorpions in the brains of those who inhaled its fragrance. Lately, however, the basil buzz has been much more positive, for it's been found to be one of the richest sources of cancer-fighting anthocyanins and polyphenols. According to the American Institute for Cancer Research, basil contains monoterpenes, a primary alcohol found in plant matter that can reduce cholesterol and may also have anti-tumor and anti-carcinogenic effects.

The herb thrives in the warmth and humidity of summer in the Garden State but, ironically, as temperatures rise, the local basil acreage tends to fall, for many vegetable farmers who grow it switch to crops like peppers and eggplants, for which they can get more money, at the height of the season, said

Van Vranken. Nonetheless, from July through September, New Jersey is a significant basil supplier.

At Delicious Orchards, as at many other markets, basil is a year-round staple, available from points south and west from late fall through early spring. "It's a good seller because it's so flavorful. I think some people just like to take it home and smell it. It just has that effect on people," said Gassaway. "Year 'round we carry the regular large-leaf basil. We're starting to get some from south Jersey now. When we can get it, we try to carry the other basils -- Thai basil, opal, lemon basil, fino verde -- but we haven't been able to get them on a regular basis."

Farmers who grow basil hydroponically year 'round tend to sell it with the roots still attached. Field-grown basil may come with or without the roots, depending on the grower.

Though powerful in aroma, basil is a delicate herb. When handled roughly, its green leaves turn an unsightly black. To prevent darkening when cutting basil into chiffonade, those dainty slivers that can top just about any entrée or side dish -- James Peterson, author of "Essentials of Cooking" (Artisan, 1999), recommends rubbing the leaves with a few drops of olive oil before stacking them, two or three at time, rolling them into tight cylinders, and slicing them into thin strips.

Highly perishable yet sensitive to the cold, basil should never be refrigerated, but it needs to be covered for it wilts quickly, said Gassaway. The best way to store it is to wrap the leaves in a damp paper towel and leave it at room temperature. The fresher it is, the longer it should keep. "In the summer you certainly get the best life out of it -- and it's cheaper, too," added Gassaway.

Wonder if a little birdie told him.

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