

AJO COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE



Fall 2009 / Week 2 of 13

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Planned harvest: Brown Asian Pears, Green Asian Pears, Melon or Watermelon, Green Beans, Glendale Gold Onions, Sweet Potatoes, Okra, Farmer's Choice.

Connecting health system reform with food system reform: In his latest article in the NY Times, Michael Pollan quotes amounts spent on treating preventable chronic diseases, most of them connected to the Western diet, i.e. the American way of eating. He predicts that if the rules for the insurance companies changed in terms of who they insure and that they could not drop them, the insurance companies would start carrying some of the real costs of fast food, both environmental and social, and therefore start campaigning with the government to change the farm bill and stop subsidizing the production of monocultures such as corn that in turn cause people to get ill. There is already some political will to promote regionally grown healthy food fresh from nearby farms as opposed to highly processed fast food from far away. The president himself has hinted at his desires to tackle food system issues in many ways: planting the presidential garden, talking about a farmers market in front of the White House, discussing a soda tax, proposing the creation of new distribution networks in order to ensure fresh produce for school lunches. This is all good news since local foods seem to be a big factor in health system and food system reform. Pollan writes that “Recently a team of designers from M.I.T. and Columbia was asked by the foundation of the insurer UnitedHealthcare to develop an innovative systems approach to tackling childhood obesity in America. Their conclusion surprised the designers as much as their sponsor: they determined that promoting the concept of a “foodshed” — a diversified, regional food economy — could be the key to improving the American diet.”

Read the whole article at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/10/opinion/10pollan.html>

The **Sweet potato** (*Ipomoea batatas*) is one of only a few cultivated vegetable crops that originated in the Americas. The wild sweet potato has been traced back to Peru as early as 8000 BC. Early Native American tribes relied on both wild and, later, cultivated varieties of sweet potato, and it was Christopher Columbus who introduced this vegetable to Europe. However, it has only been in the past decade or so that we have started seeing this tuber more regularly on the shelves of grocery stores in southern Europe. A staple of Southern cuisine, sweet potatoes are often erroneously referred to as “yams”, a family of starchy tuberous roots originating in West Africa. The sweet potato is neither a potato nor a yam but a root tuber and member of the morning glory family. They love hot weather, and grow really well in Arizona. They reproduce from roots left in the ground, and their lovely vines are heart shaped and trail beautifully. Farmer Frank grows a popular variety called Beaugard, with dark red-orange skin and moist, sweet, orange flesh.

Nutrition: Sweet potatoes rank very high in nutritional value. Besides simple starches, sweet potatoes are rich in complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, beta carotene (a vitamin A equivalent nutrient), vitamin C, and vitamin B6. In addition, preliminary studies show that despite the name “sweet”, it may be a beneficial food for diabetics, since it helps to stabilize blood sugar levels and to lower insulin resistance.

Preparation: Because of their natural sweetness, sweet potatoes go very well with savory or spicy ingredients. On the other hand, their sweetness can be accented by sweet spices and used as a wonderful base for desserts such as pies, cookies, puddings, and quick breads. Many people don't realize that sweet potatoes can be eaten raw: try grating them into your coleslaw or salad, or cut into sticks for dipping. Sweet potatoes are usually baked, whole, halved, or cut. You can leave the skin on, especially if baking whole, just make sure you scrub it well and remove any blemishes. If the skin is intact poke a few holes in with a fork. Bake your potatoes for up to 60 minutes in an oven at 350° to 400° F. If you peel and cut your sweet potatoes into smaller chunks, you can try steaming them for about 20 minutes, or roast with a variety of spices for about 25-30 minutes. Try mixing some canola or sunflower oil with your favorite spice mix, like Cajun, curry, fajita, or with your favorite barbeque or hot sauce, and toss with the chunks before roasting. Or try making your own healthy version of sweet potato chips – but beware, they are addictive! Also excellent are mashed sweet potatoes, where you cook the chunks in a bit of water for about 15-20 minutes, drain the water, and add milk, butter and sour cream to your taste, and mash. This mash also works great as a topping for your favorite shepherd's pie or a stuffing for an enchilada. Or sauté or fry ½ inch slices of sweet potatoes in oil in your pan until nicely brown on both sides and fork-tender. And of course they also make a wonderful addition to soups, stews and chilis.

RECIPES ETC.

Oven Sweet Potato Chips

(adapted from *Farmer John's Cookbook*)

2 large sweet potatoes, scrubbed well
¼ cup olive oil
1-2 tsp dried red pepper flakes (optional)
½ tsp salt

Preheat the oven to 400° F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or waxed paper. Slice the sweet potatoes into rounds as thin as you can get them (a mandoline works best if you have one). Place the sweet potatoes in a bowl, and add the oil, pepper flakes, and salt. Toss until the sweet potatoes are well coated, then spread the rounds on the baking sheet and bake until they are browned, crispy chips, about 20 minutes.

Watermelon Basil Vinaigrette

(submitted by Stephanie Doerries, adapted from About.com)

2 cups fresh watermelon, deseeded
1/8 cup vinegar (champagne, white, etc.)
1 Tbsp agave nectar
¼ cup olive oil (use more or less to achieve desired consistency)
1 tsp fresh parsley
basil (fresh or dried) to taste (at least 1 Tbsp fresh)
salt and pepper to taste

Combine all ingredients but salt and pepper in blender. Pulse on and off until blended. Season to taste with salt and pepper, adding more basil if necessary. Keeps in the fridge for up to two weeks. Enjoy over your favorite greens!

Julia Child's Baked Cucumbers

(adapted from *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*)

6 cucumbers about 8 inches long
2 Tbsp wine vinegar
1 ½ tsp salt
1/8 tsp sugar
3 Tbsp melted butter
½ tsp dill or basil
3-4 minced green onions
1/8 tsp pepper
2 Tbsp minced parsley

Peel the cucumbers. Cut in half lengthwise; scoop out the seeds with a spoon. Cut into lengthwise strips about 3/8 inch wide. Cut the strips into 2-inch pieces. Toss the cucumbers in a bowl with the vinegar, salt, and sugar. Let stand for at least 30 minutes or for several hours. Drain. Pat dry in a towel. Preheat oven to 375° F.

Toss the cucumbers in the baking dish with the butter, herbs, onions, and pepper. Set uncovered in middle level of preheated oven for about 1 hour, tossing 2 or 3 times, until cucumbers are tender but still have a suggestion of crispness and texture. They will barely color during the cooking.

Turn the baked cucumbers into the vegetable dish, sprinkle with minced parsley, and serve.

Asian Pear Chutney

(adapted from *The Hare Krishna Book of Vegetarian Cooking*)

6 medium-sized pears, peeled and cored
4 Tbsp ghee or vegetable oil
2 tsp grated fresh ginger
2 cinnamon sticks
1 tsp anise seeds
2-3 dried small chiles, crushed
5 cloves
1 tsp turmeric
1 pinch asafetida (optional)
4 Tbsp water
4 Tbsp brown sugar

Cut the pears into small chunks. Heat the ghee or vegetable oil in a saucepan, and when hot drop in the ginger, cinnamon sticks, anise seeds, chiles, and cloves. Stir-fry until the anise seeds darken (about 30 seconds). Immediately add the turmeric and asafetida, then the chunks of pears. Stir-fry to brown the pears for 5 to 6 minutes. Then add the water, cover and cook over high heat for about 15 minutes, stirring often until the pears are quite soft. Mash them slightly in the pot. Add the sugar, increase the heat, and stir continuously until the chutney thickens. Remove the cinnamon sticks and cloves. Serve at room temperature. It will keep in a fridge for at least a week, or if you make a double batch try freezing half of it.

Nina's note: You can try substituting anise seeds with cardamom seeds.