

The benefits of pumpkin seeds

'Eat what you grow and grow what you eat' is the current buzz to boost food security. But this concept should be extended to include 'eat what you would waste'. Local foods have the potential to add nutritive value to our diets if we were to use all parts of the products.

Take the case of pumpkin and its seeds that get tossed away in the garbage or backyard garden. These small, flat seeds are chewy in texture with a sweet, subtle nutty flavour. Their health value is unmatched and they add excitement to food preparation.

Nutritive value

Historically, pumpkin seeds were revered by native American Indians for nutritional and medicinal purposes. Pumpkin seeds are known for treating worms. They are rich in phosphorous, magnesium, iron, manganese, zinc and copper. They also contain vitamins A, B1, B2 and B3.

Vegetarians find them useful in supplying protein, monounsaturated fats and phytosterols. Low in calories, a one-third cup of shelled pumpkin seeds contains about 90 calories, four grams of fat, four grams of protein and 11 grams of carbohydrates. Mexico has maximised the use of pumpkin seeds in cuisine.

Men's sexual health

It is the zinc in pumpkin seeds that men find useful in protecting the prostate and other sex organs. The high levels of essential fatty acids, zinc and phytosterols have led to their prescription by naturopaths for prostate health, especially in treating benign prostate enlargement through the phytosterol, beta-sitosterol in pumpkin seed oil. In addition to maintaining prostate health, another reason for older men to make zinc-rich foods, such as pumpkin seeds, a regular part of their diet, is bone mineral density. According to the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, there is a clear correlation between low dietary intake of zinc, low blood levels of the trace mineral, and osteoporosis at the hip and spine in older men.

Preparation

Preparing pumpkin seeds is fairly easy if you want to start using them effectively. When the seeds are taken out, the flesh should be thoroughly removed while the seeds are still moist. They should be laid flat and put to air-dry for a few days. Before storing, make sure that the seeds are totally free of moisture. Store in an airtight container and place in the refrigerator where they can last for up to six months. When the seeds are going rancid, they will have a musty aroma.

Creative meal preparation

For a spicy snack, you can add one teaspoon ground cinnamon, 1/2 teaspoon ground cloves, 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg and

salt to taste to three cups of pumpkin seeds.

Sprinkle pumpkin seeds on your salads for an extra crunch.

Add to oatmeal cookies for extra nutrition.

Add to smoothies as you would add peanuts.

Add to casseroles and stews.

Make a salad dressing by grinding pumpkin seeds, fresh garlic, parsley and cilantro leaves with olive oil and lemon juice.

Give your meat and vegetable burgers an extra bite by adding crushed pumpkin seeds.

For your stir-fried vegetables, mix in pumpkin seeds for extra crunch.

Mexican Pepitas

Pepitas are pumpkin or squash seeds that have been roasted until crunchy and then salted for flavour. Pepitas are sold all over Mexico from carts on the street to bags in stores.

Ingredients

2 cups fresh pumpkin or squash seeds

2tbs oil

1tsp salt

Method

1. Heat oven to 350.
2. Rinse the seeds under water to remove as much pulp as possible. Dry them well with a towel and place them in a bowl.
3. Drizzle the oil over the top and toss with salt until seeds are evenly coated.
4. Spread in large baking dish or cookie sheet and bake for about 15-18 minutes or until they are lightly golden and crunchy.
5. Let them cool completely and store in an airtight container.

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