

Real Foods that Heal
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Asparagus

This week's "star food" is asparagus, and I am delighted to give this often-maligned vegetable some good press. Promoting asparagus will definitely appeal to those of you who are always pulling for the underdog, as asparagus in the US ranks near dead-last in per capita consumption of a long list of common fresh produce items in USDA data.

The first word I would like to emphasize in my reasoning for including asparagus in these bulletins is "variety." Recall that one of the foundational principles for disease prevention using foods is to consume a wide variety of fresh vegetables and fruits, and to look very literally for a rainbow of colors in your plant foods. This strategy of variety assures a wide mix of phyto-nutrients, which work together synergistically to neutralize toxins in the body, optimize immune function, and promote health at the level of the cell. To get straight to the point then, adding an unpopular vegetable to your plate breaks you out of a boring rut of always eating the same foods and expands your horizon of choices.

Second, let's look at the nutritional profile of asparagus. Per serving, asparagus is one of the highest vegetable sources of folate (folic acid). (when both are cooked, it is even higher than spinach... surprise!) As we highlighted in the bulletin about spinach, research has shown that women with higher levels of folate in the blood have a lower risk of breast cancer, especially for those who drink alcohol. Folate is used in the synthesis of DNA, and if it is deficient, DNA is more likely to be made with an incorrect code in the nucleic acid sequence, making cancer more likely. Folate also plays a very important role in bringing down blood levels of homocysteine; homocysteine is an independent risk factor for heart disease and strokes. So you can add cardiovascular disease prevention to the list of credits for this neglected veggie.

Asparagus is also an excellent source of Vitamin A precursors (carotenoids); remember that carotenoids are powerful antioxidants which are important for protecting the body against free radical damage. When carotenoid levels in the blood increase, risk of cancer goes down. Like many dark green vegetables, asparagus is loaded with Vitamin K, important for healthy bones. It also ranks very high in vegetable sources of omega-3 fatty acids, rounding out its role as an important anti-inflammatory vegetable.

<i>Steamed asparagus</i>

There are many recipes out there which include asparagus in casseroles or try to cover it up, rendering it mushy and tasteless. I encourage you to get to know it in a new way, by buying fresh asparagus instead of frozen or canned, and look for a bright color and crisp firm texture. When ready to prepare it, rinse the stalks, then instead of using a knife, hold the stalk in both hands and bend it until it breaks. The point where it naturally breaks is usually the dividing line between the best and tastiest part at the top and the bottom part which will make good compost. Place the tops into a steamer basket over boiling water, and steam until the color changes but the stalks are still slightly crisp. Serve immediately as a side vegetable for your dinner; no seasoning is required, as the flavor of fresh asparagus, not overcooked, is worth savoring!

To your health,

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