

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

Autumn brings incredible edibles

As George Mateljan notes in his wonderful new book, “The World’s Healthiest Foods,” the seasons create the natural backdrop for eating. If we are truly living in tune with the seasons, we’ll focus on foods that warm the body and soul in winter, such as meats, soups and roots, like carrots, potatoes and onions; in the spring, we’ll gravitate toward the fresh, tender greens that characterize life’s regeneration; in summer we’ll want to stay comfortable with “cooling” fruits and vegetables like berries, plums, peaches, and summer squash; and in the fall, we turn toward the warm, rich and hearty foods of the fall harvest.

And what a harvest it is. Go to any farmer’s market and you will see more varieties of winter squash than you knew existed – some ordinary and some exotic, with names like banana squash, buttercup, butternut, hubbard, gold nugget, turban, sweet dumpling and of course, the ubiquitous Halloween pumpkin. If you’re a squash lover, it’s a perfect time to experiment.

One squash that I encountered in my early twenties and have been experimenting with ever since is the versatile spaghetti squash. Though you can get it other times of the year, it’s particularly plentiful in the fall, nestled on shelves near its botanical squash cousins, the acorn and butternut. My family likes to eat it as “mock spaghetti,” complete with tomato sauce, garlic and parmesan cheese. But being a squash, it has a lot more to offer.



Like other winter squashes, spaghetti squash is especially high in beta carotene, and a good source of vitamin C, potassium, dietary fiber, and the mineral manganese. Beta carotene has been shown to exert a protective effect against many cancers and heart disease, according to naturopathic doctor and author Michael Murray, and in addition, appears to offer some protection against diseases of the lung caused by smoking, including lung cancer and emphysema. So now’s the time to stock up on squash, the deeper-colored, the better. Put them in a cool dark place and they can last for weeks, if not months.

How Sweet it is

Another fall vegetable with stellar nutritional credentials is the ever-adaptable sweet potato. Not only is it rich in the vitamins beta carotene, vitamin C, B6, biotin, pantothenic acid (B5) and the minerals copper and manganese, but it appears that despite its sugary taste, the sweet potato actually qualifies as an “anti-diabetic” food due to its ability to help stabilize blood sugar levels.

Christopher Columbus brought sweet potatoes back to Europe

from Central America after his first voyage to the New World in 1492. By the 16th century, Spanish explorers were traveling with the orange delicacies to the Philippines, and the Portuguese were transporting them to Africa, India, Indonesia and southern Asia. About this time, according to George Mateljan, sweet potatoes began to be cultivated in the southern United States and in the mid-20th century, the orange-fleshed sweet potato was given the name “yam” to distinguish it from other sweet potatoes.

When my daughter was in preschool, I’d store slices of cooked sweet potato in small bags in the freezer, ready to whip out when it was time for a delicious, nutritious, toddler-pleasing treat. Later on, I included it in her lunchbox as a healthy, crowd-pleasing snack. Me, I like it right out of the oven with a pat of butter or coconut oil – no “candy” (marshmallows or brown sugar) required!

Seeds of health

While we’re on the subject of fall vegetables, I don’t want to forget to mention the precious seeds that we scoop out en masse during October’s pumpkin carving season. Pumpkin seeds are a particularly nutrient dense food, full of essential fatty acids, zinc, and specialized compounds called phytosterols. Phytosterols are known to help lower cholesterol, but the kind of phytosterol in pumpkin seeds, *beta-sitosterol*, is noteworthy because it helps diminish the symptoms of a condition called benign prostate

enlargement. If you are a man over 50 you know exactly what I'm talking about!

The essential fatty acids (EFAs) in pumpkin seeds are good for the brain, heart and mood, while zinc is great for skin health, immune health, wound healing and sexual function. Of course you can go

into a health food store any time of year and pick up some pumpkin seeds. But imagine the fun of scooping them out and "roasting your own." You can follow the simple recipe found at <http://www.fabulousfoods.com/recipes/appetizers/snacks/pumpseeds.html>, or experiment with extra flavors and spices- those

suggested, or whatever you concoct.

Keep these incredible edibles in mind as healthy alternatives, as you sift through the mind-numbing mounds of post-Halloween candy. They just might be the "treats" you've been looking for this year.