

What to do with all that Garden Zucchini

by John Rizzo

Now that summer is in full swing, it won't be long before your garden, as well as everyone else's in Western Pennsylvania, is brimming with zucchini. We're all excited when we harvest the first handful; we cook our favorite recipes, give a few away and then it sets in; now what do I do with all this zucchini?

Due to its delicate flavor and soft texture, zucchini is an extremely versatile vegetable. It can be fried, sautéed, baked, steamed, braised or even eaten raw. It easily picks up the flavors of the seasonings and other ingredients in your recipe.

Although zucchini is often associated with the Italians, it dates back to 7000 BC, where it was grown for food in South and Central America. It found its way to North America by way of southern explorers and it is said to have made its way to Italy via Christopher Columbus.

Zucchini, technically a fruit, is in the same family as cucumbers and melons. It matures quickly on the vine and if you don't pick it quick enough; it takes on a new identity as some sort of mutant melon hiding beneath the large leaves of the plant. Zucchini are best when picked between 8 and 12 inches in length and have smooth glossy skin. They are edible when they over mature, but the seeds get tough and the flesh becomes spongy. If you still want to use it, scoop all of the seeds and pithy flesh from inside the zucchini before processing it.

Before loading zucchini up with bread crumbs and soaking it in grease, it's actually a pretty healthy food. It's very low in calories, fat-free, and is a good source of Vitamins C and B6, potassium and phosphorous.

One way of maintaining it's nutritional value without adding a lot of fat and calories is to grill it. Keep the oil to a minimum or use cooking spray, while coating it with your favorite seasonings. Keep an eye on it though, because it will go from very firm to mush quickly.

Grilled Summer Vegetable Salad with Balsamic Vinaigrette

Balsamic Vinaigrette Dressing

Yield 1 Cup

Balsamic vinegar	3 TBL	Canola or vegetable oil	6 TBL
Dijon mustard	1 TBL	Olive oil	6 TBL
Sugar	1 tsp.	Oregano	1/2 tsp.
Garlic, minced	1 Clove	Parsley, chopped	1 tsp.
Salt	1/2 tsp.	Onion, minced	1 TBL
Black pepper	1/4 tsp.	Chopped roasted red pepper	1 TBL

Prepare dressing by mixing all ingredients except the oil into a medium size mixing bowl. Slowly drizzle the oil into the mixture while whipping vigorously. This process emulsifies the dressing or suspends the oil into the liquid. Set aside.

Grilled Vegetables

- 1 Cup balsamic vinaigrette
 - * 1 Small eggplant, peeled and cut into 1/2 inch slices
 - * 1 Red pepper
 - * 2 Small zucchini, cut lengthwise into 1/4 - 1/2 inch slices
 - * 2 Portabella mushrooms caps
 - * 10 Asparagus spears
 - 3/4 Cup crumbled feta cheese or goat cheese
 - 2 TBL Chopped fresh parsley
 - 1/4 Cup pine nuts
 - Vegetable oil for grilling
 - 3 - 4 Leaf lettuce leaves for garnish
- * Optional ingredients*

Begin the salad by placing the whole red pepper on a hot grill. Let it char on each side until the pepper softens. Remove it from the grill and rinse under cool water while peeling the charred skin from the pepper. Continue to rub it with your fingers removing the remaining blackened skin.

Meanwhile, brush the zucchini, eggplant, mushrooms, and asparagus with oil. Place the vegetables directly on the rack of a medium hot grill. Turn as needed while brushing with oil. As the vegetables soften remove them from the grill and let cool.

Dice the grilled vegetable into 1/2 inch pieces and mix them together with the balsamic dressing.

In a small skillet, heat 1 tsp. of vegetable oil and add the pine nuts. Toss the nuts every 15 seconds or so until they are evenly browned; immediately remove them from skillet or they will continue to cook and more than likely burn.

Arrange the leaf lettuce leaves on a platter and place the grilled vegetables in dressing on top. Sprinkle in the pine nuts and top with crumbled feta or goat cheese. Top with chopped parsley and serve at room temperature.

It is ok and even recommended to cook the vegetables the day before and let them marinate in the dressing overnight.