

Jane's Garden-Fresh Basil Pesto

Summer wouldn't be complete without garden basil flourishing in abundance. With proper pruning, you can harvest generous bundles several times—until Jack Frost whispers the season is done.

A Brief History of Pesto

Pesto: A Crushed Symphony of Origins

In the terraced hills of Liguria, Italy where basil spilled down sun-warmed stone and sea breezes perfumed the air, pesto took root—not as a trend but as a tribute. Its name, *pesto*, stems from the Italian *pestare*, “to pound,” honoring the ritual of grinding vibrant, green basil leaves, garlic, pine nuts, and aged hard cheese into a fragrant paste using a mortar and pestle.

Its earliest ancestors echo through history—from Rome's *moretum*, a garlic-herb spread, to *agliata* of the Middle Ages—yet it wasn't until Giovanni Battista Ratto's 19th-century cookbook *La Cuciniera Genovese* that pesto alla genovese formally stepped into culinary rule. In this humble Genovese sauce, the region's abundance hummed through every swirl: fresh basil harvested by hand, pungent garlic grown in Mediterranean soil, golden olive oil, and crumbly Parmigiano or Pecorino.

Originally stirred into trofie or drizzled over minestrone, pesto became a symbol of resourcefulness and reverence—simple, seasonal, and deeply personal. Today, it has leapt beyond Liguria, evolving into nut-free, dairy-free, and kale-laced incarnations. Yet at its heart remains the same pulse: the memory of hands crushing green into gold, and the timeless belief that flavor begins with intention.

Which Basil to Use for Pesto? An Herbalist's Note

The classic pesto is traditionally made with Genovese basil, scientifically known as *Ocimum basilicum* var. *Genovese*. This variety is prized for its sweet, aromatic leaves with subtle hints of clove and anise, providing the signature flavor that defines traditional Italian pesto.

However, the broader species *Ocimum basilicum* includes many cultivars, each with unique nuances:

- Sweet Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) - The common culinary basil found in most gardens; versatile and flavorful.
- Lemon Basil (*Ocimum × citriodorum*) - Offers a citrusy twist, excellent in summer pesto variations.
- Thai Basil (*Ocimum basilicum* var. *thyrsoflora*) — Spicy, with anise notes, great for creative fusion pesto recipes.
- Holy Basil (*Ocimum tenuiflorum* or *Ocimum sanctum*) - Known as Tulsi, used more in herbal tonics and medicinal teas, it is less common in pesto but interesting for herbal variations. Revered in Ayurvedic medicine, Tulsi is known for its adaptogenic and immune-supportive qualities. It has a peppery, clove-like flavor.

Which Basil to Use for Pesto?

The cornerstone of traditional pesto is Genovese basil (*Ocimum basilicum* var. *genovese*), celebrated for its sweet, lush leaves with subtle clove and anise undertones. This variety not only delivers the signature flavor but also offers gentle digestive and anti-inflammatory benefits, making it a perfect culinary and wellness herb.

Using the correct basil species ensures the flavor and therapeutic qualities align with your culinary and health goals. Traditionalists will use Genovese and more adventures cooks like to branch out and experiment with other varieties.

Growing Tips for Healthy Basil

- Basil thrives in full sun (6–8 hours daily) with well-drained, fertile soil.
- Pinch back flowering tips to encourage bushier growth and prolong the harvest.
- Harvest leaves regularly to keep plants productive — best done in the morning when oils are most concentrated.
- Avoid overwatering; basil prefers slightly moist but not soggy soil.

Medicinal Notes

Basil is more than a flavorful herb; it's a gentle tonic for digestion, mild inflammation, and stress relief. The essential oils in basil leaves, such as eugenol and linalool, provide antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory benefits, supporting gut health and overall wellness. Incorporating fresh basil into your pesto is a delicious way to harness these herbal benefits daily.

Dairy-Free or Cheese-Optional | Freezer-Friendly

Small Batch – Makes about 1 heaping cup (240 ml):

2 packed cups fresh basil leaves (60 g), garbled, washed, and dried

1/3 cup raw walnuts, sunflower seeds, or hemp hearts (35 g)

2 cloves garlic (6–8 g)

2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice (30 ml)

1/2 teaspoon sea salt (3 g)

1/4 teaspoon black pepper (0.5 g)

1/3 to 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil (80–120 ml)

Optional cheesy add-in: 1 tablespoon nutritional yeast (7 g) or 1/4 cup finely grated Parmesan, Pecorino Romano, or Manchego (20–25 g)

Big Batch – Makes about 4 heaping cups (960 ml):

8 packed cups fresh basil leaves (240 g), garbled, washed, and dried

1 1/3 cups raw walnuts, sunflower seeds, or hemp hearts (140 g)

8 cloves garlic (24–30 g)

Juice of one fresh lemon

2 teaspoons sea salt (12 g) (or to taste)


1 teaspoon black pepper (2 g)

1 1/3 to 2 cups extra virgin olive oil (320–480 ml)

Optional cheesy add-in: 1/4 cup nutritional yeast (28 g) or 1 cup finely grated Parmesan, Pecorino or Manchego (80–100 g) – see Codicil below for another option

Instructions:

Add basil, nuts or seeds, garlic, lemon juice, salt, pepper, and optional cheesy add-in to a food processor. Pulse several times to begin chopping. With the machine running, slowly stream in olive oil until the pesto reaches your preferred texture—smooth and silky or rustic and spreadable. Pause to scrape down the sides and adjust seasoning as needed.

 **Freezing Instructions:** Spoon pesto into silicone ice cube trays or flexible freezer molds. Tap lightly to level, then top each portion with a thin layer of olive oil to preserve color. Freeze until solid, then pop out and transfer to labeled freezer bags. For freezing in jars, leave at least 1/2 inch of headspace to allow for expansion. Jars are best for planned thaw-and-use portions, not individual servings.

Serving Suggestions: Stir into pasta, zucchini noodles, spaghetti squash, or gluten-free pasta, grain bowls. Dollop over grilled chicken, shrimp, or salmon. Swirl into scrambled eggs or omelets. Toss with roasted vegetables or thin with extra lemon and olive oil for a vibrant salad dressing. Also excellent blended into cauliflower mash and soups. Great as a spread on your favorite flatbreads, breakfast toast, or crackers.

Codicil: White Miso as a Cheese Alternative

For a savory, umami-rich boost without dairy or nutritional yeast, try adding 1 to 2 teaspoons of **white miso paste per small batch** (about 1 cup or 240 ml) of pesto. It lends a subtle tang and depth reminiscent of cheese, while supporting gut health with its fermented probiotics. Start with 1 teaspoon and adjust to taste—miso's saltiness can vary by brand. Use it alongside or instead of the cheesy add-ins for a flavorful twist. Use 1-2 tablespoons of miso for a 4 cup batch of pesto. Miso can be salty so start with a tablespoon and taste.

Refrigerator Storage and Freshness:

Store homemade pesto in an airtight container in the refrigerator, topped with a thin layer of olive oil to prevent browning. For best flavor and freshness, use within **5 to 7 days**. If the pesto develops any off smells, discoloration, or mold, discard immediately. Always use a clean spoon when serving to avoid contamination.

Cook's Note: Nuts, Seeds & Swaps

I don't use pine nuts in my pesto—they're expensive, spoil quickly, and sometimes taste waxy or off. Walnuts are my go-to: affordable, omega-3 rich, and consistently delicious. If you need an alternative, try sunflower seeds (nut-free), hemp hearts (smooth and mild), pumpkin seeds (earthy), almonds (blanched or slivered), or cashews (for creaminess). Choose based on taste, dietary needs, and what you have on hand.

Nut Update: My friend, Diana, a nut in her own right, makes a right dandy Texas Pesto swapping out the pine nuts with lightly toasted pecans. Yee haw!

Pesto Without the Garden: Dried Basil Version

When fresh basil isn't an option, you can still make flavorful pesto from pantry staples.

Dried Basil Pesto (Makes about 1 cup):

Ingredients:

- 1/4 cup dried basil (5–6 g)
- 1/3 cup walnuts or sunflower seeds (35 g)
- 2 cloves garlic (6–8 g)
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice (30 ml)
- 1/2 teaspoon sea salt (3 g)
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper (0.5 g)
- 1/3 to 1/2 cup olive oil (80–120 ml)
- 1/4 cup Parmesan, Pecorino Romano or Manchego (vegans use ¼ cup nutritional yeast)

Instructions:

Combine everything in a food processor. Blend until smooth, then let it rest 5–10 minutes so the basil rehydrates, and flavors develop. Adjust oil, lemon, or salt as needed.

Pesto Variations Worth Making

- ✦ Parsley-Walnut Pesto: Bright and peppery. Use flat-leaf parsley and a bit more lemon.
 - ✦ Cilantro-Lime Pesto: Fresh and lively. Add pepitas, lime juice, and a pinch of cumin.
 - ✦ Mixed Basil + Parsley: Smooths out the sharper notes of full basil. Great with walnuts or pine nuts.
 - ✦ Spinach-Basil Pesto: Stretch basil with spinach for a milder, budget-friendly option.
 - ✦ Sun-Dried Tomato Pesto (Pesto Rosso): Rich and savory. Blend oil-packed tomatoes with toasted almonds and a splash of balsamic vinegar.
-

BONUS: More Garden Herb Sauces and Dips

Chimichurri: The Argentinian Zest

This lively, herbaceous sauce bursts with parsley, oregano, garlic, and a splash of vinegar. It's the perfect fresh finish to grilled meat, roasted veggies, or even as a marinade. No refined sugar, no fuss — just vibrant, clean flavor.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup fresh parsley leaves, packed
- 1/4 cup fresh oregano leaves (or 1 tbsp dried)
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/4 tsp red pepper flakes (adjust to taste)
- 2 tbsp red wine vinegar or apple cider vinegar
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and fresh ground pepper, to taste

Instructions:

Chop parsley and oregano finely or pulse briefly in a food processor. Combine all ingredients in a bowl, stir well, and let rest for 15 minutes to marry flavors. Serve fresh or refrigerated up to 3 days.

Tahini Herb Sauce: Creamy Meets Green

Rich tahini blended with bright herbs and lemon creates a luscious, dairy-free sauce perfect for drizzling over salads, grain bowls, or roasted veggies. It's silky, nourishing, and keeps your gut happy.

Ingredients:

- 1/3 cup tahini (sesame paste)
- 1/2 cup fresh parsley and/or cilantro leaves
- 1 garlic clove
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1/4 – 1/2 cup water (to thin as needed)
- Sea salt to taste

Instructions:

In a blender or food processor, combine tahini, herbs, garlic, and lemon juice. Slowly add water, blending until smooth and pourable. Season with salt. Store refrigerated up to 5 days.

Basil-Cilantro-Cashew Sauce: Creamy Herb Delight

A dairy-free, nutty sauce with fresh basil and cilantro, brightened with lemon juice. Cashews add creaminess and healthy fats, making this sauce a perfect pasta topper or dip.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup raw cashews, soaked in hot water for 30 minutes, drained
- 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves
- 1/2 cup fresh cilantro leaves
- 1 clove garlic
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1/4 – 1/3 cup water (to blend)
- Sea salt, to taste

Instructions:

Blend all ingredients in a high-speed blender until smooth and creamy. Adjust water for desired consistency. Use immediately or refrigerate for up to 3 days.

Romesco: The Smoky Nutty Classic

A rich and vibrant Spanish sauce made from roasted red peppers, nuts, and garlic, Romesco adds depth and warmth to grilled veggies, fish, or meats. Its natural sweetness and smokiness come without refined sugar or gluten—just pure flavor.

Ingredients:

- 2 large roasted red bell peppers (jarred or homemade)
- 1/3 cup raw almonds or hazelnuts, toasted
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 tbsp sherry vinegar or apple cider vinegar
- 1/4 tsp smoked paprika
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and fresh ground pepper, to taste

Instructions:

In a food processor, combine roasted peppers, toasted nuts, garlic, vinegar, and smoked paprika. Pulse until roughly chopped. With motor running, slowly drizzle in olive oil until smooth but still textured. Season with salt and pepper. Refrigerate up to 4 days.

Gremolata: The Bright Zesty Sprinkle

Gremolata is a simple, fresh mix of parsley, lemon zest, and garlic that adds an instant burst of brightness to any dish, from hearty stews or grilled meats to baked or grilled fish. It's a clean, no-cook classic that celebrates freshness and is one of my all-time favorites. Punch up your recipes with Gremolata! By the time you say it correctly 3 times, it will be ready to serve!

Ingredients:

- 1 cup fresh flat-leaf parsley, garbled, cleaned, air dried, then finely chopped
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 2 cloves fresh garlic, minced
- Optional: a pinch of red pepper flakes or a drizzle of good olive oil

Instructions:

Combine parsley, lemon zest, and garlic in a small bowl. Mix well and use immediately to finish dishes or store in the fridge for up to 2 days for freshest flavor.

Closing notes:

Garden bounty can provide us with exciting and flavorful side dishes, sauces, and dressings. Make your own herbal infused vinegars that can brighten up a cold day in February. Dehydrate some of those herbs – rosemary, oregano, mint, thyme, etc – and create your own seasoning blends. They also make delicious hot or iced teas depending on the season. It's a lot of fun, healthy, and tastes so good plus it's gratifying when you can say you made it yourself.

More recipes and cooking info can be found on my Facebook page [here](#)

Email me with questions or edits [here](#)

Enjoy!