strawberry FIELDS FOREVER

THIS TIME OF YEAR, BERRIES ARE RIPE FOR THE PICKING—WHETHER AT A LOCAL FARM OR IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

DID YOU KNOW?

Strawberries are the only fruit with seeds on the outside, a distinction that means they are not classified by botanists as true berries, which house their seeds on the inside. Indeed, the seeds—the average strawberry sports 200—are actually each considered a separate fruit.

POWERS

A recent Harvard study reported that women ages 25 to 42 who regularly consume strawberries and blueberries are at lower risk for a heart attack. The reason: the fruits' high concentrations of anthocyanin, a flavonoid that may help lower blood pressure and improve blood-vessel function. Strawberries also may help in lowering bad LDL cholesterol and C-reactive protein (a blood marker that may indicate inflammation), according to Shari Bilt Boockvar, a registered dietitian in New Jersey. "They also contain powerful antioxidants and are a great source of fiber and vitamin C," she adds. Since vitamin C–rich foods aid in the absorption of iron, pair strawberries with iron-rich foods like spinach or dried fruit.

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Strawberry-picking season kicks off the lazy days of summer in the Garden State, starting around the end of May and lasting until mid-June. Bypass the grocery stores and pick your own at one of Morris or Essex County's farms (find one at pickyourown.org). If you like the harvesting experience, you might want to try planting your own strawberry patch next season. Strawberries grow best when planted 18 to 30 inches apart, in sandy soil with excellent drainage and full sun. Plant in the spring (as early as the soil will allow), in an area that will warm quickly should there be a late-season frost.

Strawberry plants will sprout lots of runners that will form new plants if left unchecked. Cut these runners, and you'll have a higher berry yield. Strawberries spoil quickly—pick them the day they ripen and use within three days. "Refrigerate them, either in a single layer in a dish lined with paper towels or in a colander," says Boockvar, who recommends waiting to wash them until you are ready to use them. She suggests two methods: Put them into a colander and rinse with cold water, or wash each one gently with a damp cloth or paper towel. "Cut away the leaves and the portion surrounding them, as that area is very difficult to clean—but do so after washing because this can change the texture and flavor," she says.

And whenever possible, eat certified-organic strawberries: The Environmental Working Group ranks strawberries No. 5 in its "Dirty Dozen Plus" list of fruits and vegetables with the most pesticide residues. —PATTI VERBANAS

RECIPE

EASY STRAWBERRY JAM
Courtesy of Whole Foods Market

INGREDIENTS
1 lb. organic strawberries, hulled
6 Tbs. sugar
Optional flavorings:
2 slices lemon, seeds removed, or 1 sprig fresh rosemary

PREPARATION
Place the strawberries in a food processor, and pulse until just coarsely chopped, or chop them roughly with a knife. Place in a medium saucepan, and add the sugar and flavoring you'd like. Cover, and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the sugar melts and the berries soften and release some of their liquid, 4 to 5 minutes. Uncover, lower heat and simmer until the berries begin to fall apart and the mixture is thickened and no longer watery, 12 to 15 minutes.

Ladle into a glass jar; eat warm, or cool to room temperature. Cover, and refrigerate up to 2 weeks. +

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