

HERB STOP

November 2011 Highlight



Winter's Warming Spices

After a very busy summer I look forward to spending more time inside, either in the kitchen to cook up some delicious comfort foods, or curled up in front of the fireplace with a good book and a hot cup of herbal tea. How about you? Staying warm during the cold winter months is one sure way to prevent colds and flus. Besides bundling up in warm woolens, rich and delicious spices prepared in a variety of mouthwatering ways can bring warmth to the body and the soul. Let the sweet scents and warming flavors of the following spices elevate your stand-by foods.

Allspice

Allspice is the cured berry of an evergreen tree that grows in Jamaica. The Jamaican Ministry of Agriculture is vigilant about protecting it, as this tree can be fussy if not handled the right way. It is called allspice because it tastes like a natural combination of cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. Commercially, allspice is used in liqueurs, notably Benedictine and Chartreuse, and to flavor ice cream, candy, baked goods and chewing gum. In the kitchen, you can use allspice in the same way you would use any of the three flavors it resembles, in hot spicy drinks, mulled wine, as a pickling spice, for pudding and custards, in curry dishes, and in meat dishes. Allspice is available as a small dried berry or as a powder. Medicinally, allspice improves digestion and tones the nervous system. Around the house, allspice makes a wonderful air freshener to mask kitchen odors. In a crock-pot simmer one teaspoon ground allspice in two cups of water, and let the aroma drift nicely.

Anise

Anise is an annual plant, about 1 ½ feet tall, growing wild throughout the Middle East, but widely cultivated in southern Europe. Anise seeds have a warm, pleasant and sweet flavor, and can be used in soups, curries, breads, fish stews, marinades, sausages, cookies and biscotti. Anise seeds are added to Italian wedding cakes, not just for its delicate flavor, but also to prevent flatulence due to overeating. You can make a tea from anise seeds to prevent and relieve intestinal gas. Simmer ½ teaspoon anise seeds in a pint of water for about 20 minutes, strain and enjoy. Some people simply chew the seeds. It is a nice breath freshener as well.

Cardamom

Cardamom is the world's third most expensive spice, right behind saffron and vanilla. This jewel of a spice grows wild in Indian and Sri Lanka. The green cardamom pods hold tiny, dark, aromatic seeds that have a lemony flavor. While white cardamom pods are green pods that have been bleached by the sun, or chemicals, is not recommended. Although brown cardamom is considered inferior to green cardamom, its smoky flavor is wonderful in hearty meat dishes or assertive vegetables. Use cardamom in sweet and savory dishes, especially curries and rice, and with citrus. Try adding it to hamburger meat. Medicinally, cardamom is known to stimulate digestion, energize the spleen, and relieve gas. Chew it to freshen your breath. Green cardamom warms the kidneys, while white cardamom warms the lungs, eliminating phlegm. In certain cultures, cardamom is added to coffee as a sign of hospitality because it is one of the most expensive spices. There is also some evidence that it reduces or eliminates the negative effect of the caffeine in coffee.

Cinnamon

Most of the "cinnamon" sold in the United States is actually a blend of cinnamon and cassia. They are both produced from the bark of tropical evergreen trees. If your were to taste plain cassia and plain cinnamon, you would find cassia's flavor bitter, while cinnamon's is warm and sweet. Cinnamon sticks made of true cinnamon look like quills (a single tube); cinnamon sticks made from cassia are rolled from both sides toward the center so that they end up looking like scrolls. Cinnamon is added to desserts, stewed fruits, curries, teas and coffees, but you may enjoy it also in other dishes and marinades. Use cinnamon for a delicate taste, as in fresh ingredients, and cassia when a stronger flavor is desired, as with dried ingredients.

Cloves

Cloves are the dried flower buds of a tropical evergreen tree. They are picked just before they open into blossoms, and then dried in the open air until they turn dark brown. The word “clove” comes from the Latin word “clavus” which means nail, as it looks like a nail. This versatile spice can be added to meats, baked beans, split pea or bean soups, stewed and baked fruits, desserts, pickles, mulled wine, mincemeat, and marinades. To make a nice air freshener for the room, stick whole cloves into the peel of a large firm orange until the entire orange is completely covered. Let it dry until the orange shrinks. Hang this “pomander ball” in your closet. What a lovely scent and a good insect repellent, instead of mothballs. In addition, a whole clove clamped between the teeth can freshen your breath, as well as temporarily relieve a toothache.

Coriander – Cilantro

Warm and citrusy at the same time, coriander seed is enjoyed in curries and chili, cookies and cakes. A sister to cilantro – both come from the same plant – coriander seed has a lovely, fragrant aroma once ripened, while cilantro is often describes as fetid. You can use cilantro to temper pungent spices if you’ve used too much.

Ginger

Ginger is one of the most well-known and versatile spice, as it blends very well with other seasonings. It is said that gingerbread has been invented on the isle of Rhodos in 2400 B.C. You can add fresh or dried powdered ginger to complement desserts, to roasted vegetables and meats, seafood and stir-fries. One-half teaspoon ground ginger equals one to two teaspoons chopped fresh ginger. To make “pink ginger”, slice young ginger roots, dip it in lemon juice and season with salt. Lemon juice turns the ginger root pink. Ginger not only adds flavor to food, it may also act as an antioxidant, a digestive aid, as well as for nausea and sea sickness. Steep the peeled flesh in hot water for ginger tea.

Mace & Nutmeg

Mace has always been nutmeg’s forgotten twin. The nutmeg tree is unique as it offers two separate spices – mace and nutmeg. Mace is the bright red, shiny fiber that wraps around the nutmeg seed. Although similar, both the aroma and flavor of mace are much more potent than those of nutmeg. Mace is usually added to baked sweets, but is excellent when added to vegetables, soups, stews, and curries. Nutmeg is added to pasta fillings, white sauce, beverages, breakfast cereals (hot oatmeal), spinach and Swiss chard.

Star Anise

Star anise is the fruit of a small evergreen tree native to southern China and Vietnam. The shape of the fruit is that of an eight-pointed star. Star anise is the main ingredient in Chinese five spice powder. It adds delicious flavor to seafood dishes, roasted poultry, desserts, and brings out the sweetness in beets, carrots, and yams. Although unrelated to anise seed, it has the same aroma. Medicinally, star anise is a diuretic and appetite stimulant. It relieves flatulence and nausea. In Chinese herbal medicine it is recommended for lumbago, constipation, and bladder problems. It is also used to flavor cough medicines. To make a tea, pour one cup boiling water over one teaspoon crushed star anise seeds. Let it steep for 5 minutes, then strain, and enjoy with or without honey

Ras El Hanout

This is my absolute favorite spice blend. The name Ras el Hanout means “head of the shop” or “top of the shelf”. This exotic seasoning blend has a robust spicy flavor to excite your taste buds. Ras el Hanout is a renowned Moroccan spice blend, absolutely delicious in almost any dish. Rub into meats, mix with rice and couscous, or enhance a vegetable dish, such as tagines. I like to add it to my oatmeal breakfast, sprinkle on apple pieces, or on a toast with honey. Thought to be an aphrodisiac, this blend contains paprika, turmeric, coriander, cinnamon, cumin, black cumin, thyme, black pepper, allspice, nutmeg, anise, cardamom, caraway, lavender, cayenne, cloves, and rose petals.

Fun activity

Around the holiday season why not decorate your home with whole spices. Gather the children and make spice necklaces with star anise, allspice berry, cinnamon sticks, nutmeg nuts, cardamom pods, and cloves. These exciting and festive aromatic spices bring beauty and cheerfulness to everyone.

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