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sage

*Wise up to the many uses
of this aromatic herb*

BY PEGGY MYERS WALZ

Come the holidays, sage is all the rage. Folded into stuffing, stirred into cornbread, simmered into sauces and gravies, the fragrant herb is as much a scent of the season as evergreen and sugar cookies.

“Thanksgiving dressing wouldn’t be the same if it weren’t loaded with sage,” says Theo Petron, owner of Dinner-Where in Minneapolis–St. Paul. “The smell reminds me of my grandmother hovering over a Dutch oven making her special recipe.”

A member of the mint family, garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is a Mediterranean plant with long, pointed, grayish green or variegated leaves—and a

pronounced aroma. *Salvia* comes from the Latin *salvus*, which means to render safe, and the herb was revered by the ancients, who believed it prolonged life. Sage has been used to treat typhoid fever, kidney troubles, and liver complaints, and to help calm the nerves and soothe the throat. Early American settlers claimed it could cure warts. And “smudge sticks” made of bundles of sagebrush sprigs (a different plant species with a similar scent) are burned in Native American ceremonies to purify rooms of negative energy.

These days, the herb is more likely to be used to doctor up a recipe than cure aches and pains. In the kitchen, dried or fresh sage adds a bright note to mild fall vegetables like eggplant, winter squash, carrots, and mushrooms. Chopped sage can be used to

flavor breads and baked goods, creamy cheese spreads, egg dishes, and bean recipes—even pastas and piecrusts. For example, Petron throws together several foods that go well with sage: He makes a goat cheese–stuffed ravioli topped with a butternut squash and sage sauce. Then he flash-fries whole leaves in a little olive oil for a potato chip–like garnish. Fragrant pineapple, tangerine, and honey-melon varieties of sage look and taste very different from garden sage but are members of the same plant family. They can add delicate, fruity flavor to desserts and are wonderful garden options with their bright flowers that blossom midsummer and attract hummingbirds.

“Adding sage to a dish can help to make it more red wine friendly, especially with lighter and/or

fruitier reds like Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Syrah/Shiraz,” say Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg, authors of *What to Drink with What You Eat*. This is a big plus when serving cooked tomato and onion/garlic-based items that can be too acidic or pungent for certain wines.

Sage can also pinch-hit for other typically Mediterranean herbs like thyme, basil, and oregano. “Usually, I am a huge oregano and basil fan, but substituting sage one evening produced some wonderful flavors in a tomato sauce,” says Jerry Jordan of Raging Sage Coffee Roasters in Tucson, Ariz. Jordan likes to showcase sage at the coffee shop, where pecan-sage scones filled with jalapeño jam are a customer favorite.

The only thing to watch out for is the tendency of fresh sage to turn bitter when used in large quantities. If you want to play it safe, dip the leaves in boiling water followed by ice water to eliminate any astringency, recommends Franklin Becker, executive chef at Brasserie in New York. Another option: Choose one of the more colorful sage varieties—purple, golden, or tricolor—which tend to be milder in flavor.

And should you find yourself with leftover sprigs once the holiday cooking is done, simply freeze them in a plastic bag or dry them in a single layer on a kitchen towel, then rub the dried leaves into a powder so you can enjoy the hearty, homey flavor (and aroma) well into the new year.

5 ways to try it

1

Marinate a goat cheese log with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil, 1 teaspoon minced garlic, and a few whole sage leaves in a resealable plastic bag overnight for an easy appetizer.

2

Whip up a sage pesto by replacing the basil in your favorite recipe with half fresh sage leaves and half fresh parsley leaves.

3

Fold 3 tablespoons chopped fresh sage into apple pie filling, or add 1 teaspoon chopped fresh sage to Perfect Every Time Piecrust (p. 71).

4

Flavor $\frac{3}{4}$ cup warmed honey with $\frac{1}{3}$ cup chopped fresh sage—use in marinades, drizzle on oatmeal, or spread on toast.

5

Steep $\frac{1}{4}$ cup whole fresh sage leaves in 3 cups boiling water 5 minutes for herbal tea. Flavor with honey and lemon.