Put a New Spin on an Old Standby

With fresh Florida produce abounding in the grocery stores and farmer’s markets, this is a great time to enjoy the many vegetables and fruits available. What better way to explore produce than to make a salad?

“Oh . . . salad,” you say? Did you just think of a clump of light green lettuce on your plate with a few shredded carrots and thick dressing piled on top? Well, think again. Salad can be so much more.

Begin by thinking eye appeal. A salad plate that is pleasing to the eye will also be pleasing to the palate. Create salads that are filled with color, offering a variety of vitamins, minerals and fiber. The colors, the chemicals found naturally in plants, are necessary for our good health.

Eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day has been associated with helping protect against certain types of cancer, heart disease and osteoporosis. Create a salad using a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables.

Adding deep reds or bright pinks to your salad adds lycopene to your diet. Lycopenes are being studied for their ability to fight heart disease and some cancers and are found in tomatoes, red and pink grapefruit, watermelon, papaya and guava. For more eye-appealing red color and other health benefits, add strawberries, raspberries, or red peppers to your salad.

In addition to adding bright orange color to your plate, orange foods such as carrots and apricots contain beta-carotene which may help strengthen your immune system. Folate is also found in orange fruits and vegetables. This B vitamin may help prevent some birth defects and reduce the risk of heart disease. So add some cantaloupe, peaches and oranges to your next salad.

Yellow fruits and vegetables have many of the same benefits of the orange foods. Grapefruit is rich in Vitamin C. Corn and pears are high in fiber.

Green foods are essential to your diet as they are rich in the phytochemicals that keep you healthy. Broccoli, lettuce and other greens, spinach, chives, peas, kiwi fruit, green peppers and fresh herbs all add color and flavor to your salad. Some greens protect your eyes by keeping your retina strong while others may reduce the risk of cancer.

Blues and purples, such as blueberries, blackberries, red cabbage, and raisins, bring beautiful colors to your plate while adding health-enhancing compounds that may reduce your risk of cancer.

Cabbage, cauliflower, onions, garlic, scallions, leeks, potatoes and bananas add white to your plate. Some of these vegetables are being studied to determine if they help lower cholesterol and blood pressure and increase the body’s ability to fight infections.

Once you have selected a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables to create your salad, the next step is to make it low-fat. Use nonfat or low-fat dressings on your salad. If you prefer a fat-based dressing, reduce the amount of fat in other parts of your meal. Should you decide to include protein on your salad, select low-fat forms of meat, poultry, seafood and dairy products.

Do you only think of salad as a side dish or as an appetizer? Consider switching your salad to the main dish for some of your meals. In addition to fruits and vegetables, consider combining low-fat meat, poultry, seafood, cooked dry beans, eggs and/or nuts into your salad. What about using rice or pasta for a salad base? Topping your salad with slivers of cheese, crunchy, baked croutons or a yogurt-based dressing can add new flavors.

Whatever your pleasure, create delicious, healthy salads that are pleasing to your eye and to your palate.