

Luscious Lemon Basil



Photo is special to the Democrat: Lemon basil can add a sweet, lemony flavor to many summer dishes.

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Basil, with its thick, fragrant leaves, is the quintessential summer herb. The vast arrays of basil varieties have always been shadowed by the typical Italian sweet basil. In my garden however, that old standby has taken second place to my cherished lemon basil.

I first encountered lemon basil four years ago at Native Nurseries, where I work. Betty O'Toole had just brought in her weekly delivery of summer herbs and veggies from her farm in Madison. She had a fresh flat of 'Mrs. Burns Lemon Basil', an heirloom lemon basil variety dating back to pre-1940.

I had seen lemon basil offered in seed catalogues before, but the question still remained for me; what do you do with lemon basil? Despite that lingering doubt, I was immediately seduced by the bright, sweet lemony scent and took one home to add to my vegetable garden.

My first foray into culinary uses of lemon basil began by substituting it for sweet basil in my regular pesto recipe. This brought about glorious results and I soon began adding it to many different dishes to see how that luscious lemon flavor might brighten them up. Of these experiments, two have grown to become my favorite summer dishes. The first resulted from adding lemon basil to my typical cucumber and cream cheese sandwich. I had been inspired by the heirloom lemon cukes I was growing which already had a slight citrus tang to them. The additional lemony layer was addictive, especially when on sourdough bread.

I was inspired to create my second dish by my friend Mike, who had been adding his bountiful lime basil that summer to many delicious pizzas. The resulting lemon basil pizza recipe remains my favorite pizza today and is sorely missed through the long winter months when lemon basil leaves my garden.

Here are my recipes for my two favorite lemon basil recipes:

Lilly's Lemon and Cuke Sandwich

Pretty simple. Sourdough bread smeared with a generous helping of cream cheese, a bed of fresh lemon basil leaves and sliced cucumbers (garden or market fresh makes all the difference). Enjoy on a summer afternoon or slice into petit-fours as an appetizer.

Luscious Lemon Basil Pizza

Preheat the oven to 400. Again I prefer sourdough pizza dough, but regular Italian is fine as well. You can easily make your own or pick up some fresh refrigerated dough at the grocers.

Roll out the dough onto a pizza stone that has been sprinkled with finely ground cornmeal. I like to make attempts at hand tossing it, but these usually fail laughingly. Drizzle some olive oil across the dough and smooth it out. Sprinkle sea salt over the dough, and then lay a thick bed of fresh lemon basil. Sprinkle mozzarella across, and don't be stingy. Delicious!

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