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April Showers Bring May ... Produce!

By Debbie DeAngelo
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What's your favorite part about spring? While many people cite that it's a season of renewal, ushers in beautiful flowers, or is a prelude to warm weather, my answer is always the same – it brings ramps and dandelion greens.

Whether from your own garden, a farmer's market, or community supported agriculture, spring is the season when produce such as rhubarb, peas, radishes, spinach, and arugula are at their best. These days you can get most fruits and vegetables year-round, but that doesn't mean they're at their peak. Case in point,

a winter tomato just can't hold its own against a summer tomato. Also, eating in-season not only allows us to support local farmers, but the produce is more nutritious when it isn't harvested before it's ripe so that it can be transported and stored without spoiling.

Overlooked All-Stars

Sometimes we get stuck in a food rut. We buy the same foods and eat them in the same way, day in and day out. This habitual practice prevents us from noticing the variety that Mother Nature has to offer. It is especially true of fruits and vegetables. Let's break out of the food rut by trying members of Spring's Bounty that we may otherwise pass up.

Asparagus. Low in calories, yet high in nutrients and taste, asparagus is available most of the year; however, peak time is in the spring. Select bright green spears with tightly closed tips. Thicker spears are better suited for roasting and grilling while thinner ones work well for steaming. If not using right away, trim the stalks, place in a few inches of water in a jar (like a bouquet), and store in the fridge. Asparagus teams well with seafood and pasta or enjoy it on its own with EVOO, garlic, and parmesan cheese.

Fava Beans. Also known as broad beans, favas are legumes, like peas and other beans, and are popular in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cuisine. Fresh favas have an exterior skin that needs to be removed prior to eating, which is why many people use the canned version instead. Although preparing fresh favas is time-consuming, the results are incomparable. Fresh ones impart a buttery texture with a hint of nuttiness. They can be used just like chickpeas. The canned variety can be substituted for other legumes, such as black or cannellini beans, in recipes. One half cup provides five grams of protein and fiber, as well as iron, potassium, and magnesium. Also, you can find roasted, salted, fava beans in the snack aisle of the grocery store. They make for a convenient, on-the-go nosh.

Dandelion Greens. That little yellow flower growing in your yard might seem like a weed to some, but its young, tender leaves are quite delicious. The health quotient of this green Goddess exceeds that of other greens. Simply use it the way you would spinach. I prefer to make a simple dandelion salad and top it with sliced oranges, chopped hard boiled eggs, shaved parmesan cheese, and a drizzle of vinaigrette. If you decide to harvest your own dandelions rather than purchase them, steer clear of places that have been sprayed with chemicals (including your own lawn) or are near other sources of potential contaminants.

Ramps. With a flavor similar to a hybrid of garlic and onions, ramps are often referred to as wild leeks. These foraged greens grow mostly along the East Coast and are eagerly anticipated during their short growing period each April and

May. Since they will leave a distinctive odor in your fridge, you may want to use them quickly. Try them in scrambled eggs, atop a homemade pizza, alongside ham or in soup.

Invigorate your palate by trying some of these vegetables or any of the other spring offerings. Taking advantage of produce during its prime time will yield peak flavor and nutrition. Bon Appetit!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie DeAngelo, RNC, BSN, is a holistic health coach, health correspondent for JET-TV and FOX 66 in Erie, Pennsylvania, and author of "Sudden Menopause." Debbie can be reached at debbie@healthonheels.com.



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