The Healthy Handful

Carolyn Denton, N.S., L.N.
Abbott Northwestern Hospital

Most edible plants are health-giving to humans, so it is difficult to limit their “power” to only a handful. The following plants were recommended by nutrition experts because they are generally not known to trigger negative immune responses (e.g., sensitivity to nightshade vegetables: tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, white potatoes); have a variety of color and potent anti-inflammatory, antioxidant activity; and are loaded with phytonutrients.

Phytonutrients are produced by plants as a way to protect themselves against being eaten by insects and/or attacked by disease. When we eat a plant, we benefit not only from its vitamin and mineral content, but also from the protection its phytonutrients provide. Phytonutrients are considered anti-inflammatory and have been shown to possess anticancer properties, aid detoxification, enhance immunity, and boost health.

Dark Green

Swiss Chard
Loaded with potassium, beta carotene.
Helps blood sugar levels stay steady.
Try: Boil for 3 minutes, then sauté in olive oil with sweet potatoes.

Kale
High in antioxidants and sulfur, both of which aid in support of the detoxification system.
Also serves as an anti-inflammatory.
Try: Sauté kale with sliced pear in olive oil. Drizzle with vinegar and top with toasted pecans.

Broccoli
Anticancer phytonutrients called isohiocyanates and indole 3 carbinol help to metabolize hormones effectively.
High in vitamin K, broccoli can support vitamin D metabolism and influence bone health.
Try: Steam broccoli florets. Toss with a vinaigrette (e.g., Paul Newman’s) and goat cheese.

Light Green/Yellow

Leek
Contains allyl sulfides, which help protect against cancer and decrease the tendency for blood clots to form.
Leeks are high in the B vitamin folate, shown to be valuable in cardiovascular support.
Try: Sauté leeks in coconut oil and add to steamed carrots.

Celery
Shown to be a natural diuretic.
Has been used for centuries to lower blood pressure.
One of most powerful detoxifying foods, celery also helps support a healthy immune system.
Try: Raw celery with dips – humus, or the ever popular peanut-butter-and-raisin combo – provides a filling snack alternative.
**Red**

**Red Pear**
Antioxidant activity as well as a high copper content helps protect the cells from free-radical damage. Can influence the immune system to help fight infection.

**Try:** Add sliced pear to any greens with nuts and feta cheese for a delightful sweet and savory salad.

**Red Apple**
The list of benefits is lengthy, including: lowered risk of many types of cancer, antioxidant protection, high in soluble fiber and, most recently, has been shown to reduce symptoms of asthma.

**Indeed, an “apple a day…”!**

**Try:** Making apple sauce is a cinch. Add water and cinnamon to sliced apples. Heat until apples soften.

**Orange**

**Carrot**
High in antioxidants, loaded with vitamin A. Great for eye health and protection of vision, especially night vision.

**Try:** Soak raw carrot sticks in hot water spiced with cayenne pepper, coriander seeds and salt. Allow to cool. Drain.

**Sweet Potato**
Contains the phytonutrient quercitin. Has anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. High in vitamin B6, which is needed to reduce homocysteine levels (elevated homocysteine levels are associated with several disease processes).

**Try:** Purée cooked sweet potatoes with cinnamon, nutmeg and maple syrup.

**Butternut Squash**
Rich in caroteinoids. Has been shown to influence lung health. High fiber content is associated with protection from toxins within the colon.

**Try:** Butternut squash soup: Cubed butternut squash, two pears, thyme and broth to cover. Simmer until squash is tender, then purée.

**Purple**

**Dried Plum (Prune)**
High in soluble fiber. Great for regularity. High in antioxidants and phytonutrients.
Can have a cholesterol-lowering effect.

**Try:** Add prunes to stews or combine with nuts in a “trail mix”.

**Blueberry**
Contains the phytonutrient anthocyanin. Also possesses powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Shown to be beneficial to brain health and improving memory.
Has been shown to protect against macular degeneration.

**Try:** Add blueberries to almost anything! Or just enjoy by the handful.