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## Parsley is more than just a pretty leaf

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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No matter what the time of year, few things in the produce aisle consistently look as perky as parsley. Flat-leaf or curly, the vibrant herb appears to want to jump into each passing shopping cart. And for about a buck a bunch, there's no reason not to snap up a green bunch or two.

But many shoppers, it seems, have little use for parsley. Who has time to garnish dinner plates? And, really, if you leave out that tablespoon or two most recipes call for, will it make that much of a difference?

People sell themselves short when they think of parsley simply as a culinary embellishment, according to Louise Hyde of Well-Sweep Herb Farm in Port Murray, where parsley, both curly and not, is among her top sellers.

"You want to eat it," she said. At her farm, she noted, customers increasingly "are using it just for the vitamin quality of it."

Dainty parsley, a nutritional heavyweight?

Indeed. A natural breath freshener, thanks to its high chlorophyll content, parsley is a very good source of dietary fiber, calcium, copper, folate, iron, magnesium, manganese, potassium and vitamins A, C, and K. In addition, it's



also a good source of protein, thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, vitamin B6, pantothenic acid, phosphorus and zinc.

"Parsley may be good for you, but eating a one-ounce serving (about  $\hat{A}$ <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> cup loosely packed) is a chore. So I run a handful of parsley through the juicer along with carrots, kale, a beet and chard leaves. A pint of this juice daily is my super-energizer. You could also mix it with spinach, collards and other vegetables that juice well," wrote Jeff Cox in "The Organic Food Shopper's Guide" (Wiley, \$14.95).

"Just use it in salads," recommended Hyde. "Chop it and sprinkle it on vegetables -- boiled potatoes, any kind of beans. Even corn -- it makes it pretty and tasty."

There's certainly plenty to go around. Along with California and Florida, New Jersey is a significant producer of parsley, with about 500 acres planted. Whereas most of California's crop is dried, the bulk of the parsley grown in New Jersey and Florida is destined for fresh consumption, explained Rich Van Vranken, an agricultural agent with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County in Mays Landing. Demand remains steady because "it's a staple in restaurants," said Van Vranken. "And from the late 80s on, it became more prominently available in grocery stores."

Local commercial growers typically harvest three parsley plantings: the overwintered crop, which is planted in late August through mid-September and harvested the following March through May; the spring crop, which is planted in March and April and harvested May through June; and the fall crop which is planted in late July and harvested from late August through the first frost.

Native to the Mediterranean, parsley has quite an international following. It's essential in the tabbouleh of the Middle East and the chimichurri sauce that accompanies most grilled meats in Argentina.

In Great Britain, parsley sauce is "a great but much abused stalwart of English cooking," wrote Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall in "The River Cottage Cookbook" (Ten Speed Press, \$35). He describes parsley as a "friendly" herb, noting that "almost any savory dish, fish in particular, benefits from its mild, grassy taste, which also helps bring out the flavor of many other herbs."

Italian cooking calls for parsley in several sauces and combines it with chopped garlic and lemon peel in gremolata, the classic topping for osso buco. In France, persillade, also made from parsley and garlic, seasons tomato, potato, lamb and seafood dishes.

"Parsley and garlic are one of the great culinary pairings," wrote Fearnley-Whittingstall. "Heated together with a little butter and wine, they will do wonders for virtually anything that has lived in the seas, and plenty of things that haven't, from frog's legs to chicken livers, spuds to snails."

And, yes, a sprig or two on the rim of your plate will look lovely as well.

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