

FOOD COLUMN



COOL CUCUMBERS

BY ANGELA SHELF
MEDEARIS
KITCHEN DIVA

Cucumbers are a go-to vegetable for salads, but there are many ways to incorporate this cool, crunchy vegetable into everything from appetizers to drinks. Cucumbers are one of the oldest cultivated crops and have more than 100 different varieties. It's believed they were first cultivated in India.

Cucumbers are at their best when young and tender with a crunchy texture. They come in many sizes. Some of the most popular varieties are the Dosakayi, popular in India for curries and stews; crunchy "slicers," used in salads; and pickles like gherkins, dills and sweet French cornichons.

The English cucumber is longer and narrower than the slicer varieties. Its seeds are much smaller and the skin is thinner. This type of cucumber may be labeled

as "seedless" or "burpless." It usually comes wrapped in plastic and unwaxed. The taste of English cucumbers also is less bitter, and some find it almost sweet.

Cucumbers have about 15 calories per 100 grams, and the peel is a good source of dietary fiber and is a mild diuretic, which helps to eliminate toxic materials in the gut. It's also a great source of potassium and is low in sodium, which helps with blood pressure and heart rates.

Cucumbers are high in vitamin K, which helps with bone strength. It also has established a role in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease by limiting neuronal damage in the brain.

When purchasing cucumbers, select ones that have a firm texture and a bright-green color. There shouldn't be any spots, cuts or breaks in the skin. A wrinkled, large or yellowish cucumber means it is over ripe, lacking nutrients and tough.

Before using or storing, cucumbers should be washed using cool, clear water and dried thoroughly to get rid of any surface dirt and pesticide residue. They may require light scrub at spots where prickles or dirt is evident.

Cucumbers can be stored at room temperature for a day or two, but for best results, store them for up to a week in a plastic bag in your refrigerator's crisper drawer.

You can use cucumbers in a variety of ways. Fresh, cleaned cucumbers can be enjoyed as they are. You also can cut cucumbers into cubes with the skin and add them to vegetable or fruit salads. Finely chopped, fresh cucumber slices are delicious when mixed with yogurt, cumin, coriander, pepper and salt to make cucumber raita, the popular Indian condiment that adds a cooling effect to spicy dishes.

English cucumbers are great eaten skin and all, but with some other varieties

you may want to peel them first (especially ones with thick skins). If you're making a salad with seeded or slicer cucumbers, cut them lengthwise and use a spoon to scoop out the seeds.

Cucumbers also can be blended into a juice and combined with other vegetables and fruits, like my recipe for Strawberry Cucumber Lime Coolers. It's the perfect way to cool off with cucumbers on a hot summer day!

— *Angela Shelf Medearis is an award-winning children's author, culinary historian and the author of seven cookbooks. Her new cookbook is "The Kitchen Diva's Diabetic Cookbook." Her website is www.divapro.com. To see how-to videos, recipes and much, much more, Like Angela Shelf Medearis, The Kitchen Diva! on Facebook. Recipes may not be reprinted without permission from Angela Shelf Medearis*

STRAWBERRY CUCUMBER LIME COOLER

3 to 4 large peeled, cubed English cucumbers (3/4 pound)
2 cups frozen strawberries
2/3 cups sugar, honey or agave syrup
1/2 cup fresh lime juice
4 cups cold water or clear soda water, unflavored seltzer or sparkling water

1. Combine cucumbers, strawberries, sugar, honey or agave, and lime juice in a blender; blend until cucumbers and strawberries are smooth.
2. Pour mixture through medium mesh sieve placed over a pitcher, and press it with a spoon to remove any lumps. Pour cold water, soda, seltzer or sparkling water into the pitcher and stir until well-combined.
3. Pour into glasses with ice and garnish with thinly sliced strawberries, limes or cucumbers. Serve immediately. Serves 4.

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