

News from the watershed

Jennifer Abbey

Recipes - Tomato

Florida and California annually account for two-thirds to three-fourths of all commercially produced fresh-market tomatoes in the United States. Including processing, Florida is the second-largest tomato-producing State, but it is tops in producing fresh-market tomatoes.

Tomatoes are one of the highest-valued crops in Florida and bring in about one-third of the State's vegetable cash receipts. Florida's season, October to June, has the greatest production in April and May and again in November to January.

Fresh Florida tomatoes are low-calorie, low-sodium, a good source of fiber and high in vitamins A and C. Studies show that the antioxidant lycopene found in tomatoes blocks cancer, aging, and cellular damage. Ripe, red Florida tomatoes add flavor, color and good nutrition to any dish.

To test for ripeness, first look at color. It should be an even, bright red. Next check firmness. The tomato should yield slightly to pressure. Never store tomatoes in the refrigerator. A chilled tomato will not finish ripening as cold halts the ripening process. Cold also kills the flavor of tomatoes, so even when the tomatoes are fully ripe, keep them out of the refrigerator.

If your Florida tomatoes are not yet ripe, you can ripen them by storing them at room temperature in a dry spot. A day or two at room temperature may be enough, usually no more than five days. Just wait until you can see they are a rich red color. Always store your tomatoes stem end up. Leaving a tomato on its shoulders, even for a few days, is enough to bruise it.

Fresh ripe tomatoes are great tasting all by themselves, but they're also fun and easy to cook with. The following recipes should help get you started cooking with fresh ripe tomatoes.

Tomato Sandwiches

Serves 6 to 8

These delicious treats are deceptively simple. Serve them as a light lunch or versatile side dish.

Ingredients:

6-8 large firm, ripe red tomatoes

1/2 cup mayonnaise or whipped cream cheese

1 large onion, thinly sliced

6-8 small arugula leaves, washed & patted dry (or other leafy green)

2 large eggs, lightly beaten with 1 tablespoon water

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup bread crumbs, unflavored, toasted

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons olive oil

Slice each tomato to obtain 1/2-inch thick slices from the widest portion of the tomato, making sure to avoid the core. Spread 1 heaping tablespoon of mayonnaise on one half of the tomato slices. Top each with an onion slice, arugula leaf and a second slice of tomato. Dip each sandwich into the beaten egg mixture and then the bread crumbs. Gently shake off any excess bread crumbs. Set sandwiches aside. In a large heavy sauté pan, warm the butter and olive oil over medium heat. Slip each sandwich into the pan and fry until golden brown, about 3 minutes on each side. Remove and serve immediately.

Spaghetti Squash with Florida Tomatoes

Serves 4 to 6

Spaghetti squash is a rich, mellow vegetable and when accented with sautéed fresh Florida tomatoes, and with a hint of balsamic vinegar, it becomes a delicious entrée.

Ingredients:

1 large spaghetti squash, cut in half lengthwise
3 T. olive oil
5 medium firm, ripe, Florida tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped
1 clove garlic, peeled and crushed
1 cup balsamic vinegar
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 cup Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
1 cup fresh basil, cut into strips

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Wrap squash halves in foil, place in baking dish and bake for 45 minutes, or until tender.

Remove squash from oven and remove foil. Scoop out seeds and stringy fibers and discard. With a large spoon scoop out flesh into a bowl. Using two forks, pull apart flesh so that it separates into slightly crisp spaghetti strands. Transfer to an oven proof dish and keep warm in oven.

In a large-sized sauté pan, warm olive oil over medium heat. Add tomatoes and garlic and cook for 20-30 minutes, until mixture is thick. Add vinegar, salt and pepper to taste.

Remove squash from oven and top with the prepared tomato sauce. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese, and basil strips. Serve immediately.

For more recipes visit www.floridatomatoes.org

Jennifer Abbey is a NRCS Soil Conservationist with the Highlands County Soil and Water Conservation District: www.highlandsswcd.org