

Florida Food Fare

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Cucumber

Description: Cool and moist due to their high water content, cucumbers belong to the gourd family. This long, cylindrical green-skinned fruit has edible seeds surrounded by a mild, crisp flesh. The thin skin, unless waxed, does not require peeling. The most common varieties of regular cucumbers are slicers and picklers. As the names suggest the larger, smooth skinned slicer is most suited for using raw in salads or relish trays, while the pickler, which is smaller and has small lumps on its surface is commonly used for pickling purposes. Slicing cucumbers vary in length between 6 and 8 inches and from 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 inches in diameter and are often waxed to seal in moisture. They are usually harvested at a more mature stage than picklers. As a cucumber matures, the seeds grow bitter, therefore the seeds of an older cucumber should be removed before it is used. Young immature slicing cucumbers are also suitable for pickling. Gourmet cucumbers, sometimes called burpless or seedless are longer and thinner than regular cucumbers. Shrink-wrapped to seal in moisture, these are not waxed.

Availability: Florida produces more cucumbers than any other state. Approximately one-half of all fresh cucumbers marketed in the nation come from within our state. Cucumbers are available year-round in the supermarket. Locally cucumbers are grown from October through June, with May being the peak of the growing season in Florida.

Nutritional Value: Cucumbers are very low in calories, fat, sodium and cholesterol free. A half-cup of cucumber slices yields a mere 6.7 calories. They also contain small amounts of other important vitamins and minerals; 7.2 mg calcium, 10.4 mg phosphorus, 74.8 mg potassium, 6.7 mcg folate, 0.4 g dietary fiber, and 111.8 IU vitamin A. Interestingly enough, the vitamin content remains quite stable throughout the pickling process.

Selection and Care: Look for firm, fresh well-shaped cucumbers that have a rich green color and a smooth skin. Avoid those with shriveled or soft spots. Over-mature cucumbers may be tough and somewhat bitter. Often a thin coat of edible wax is sprayed on cucumbers to help keep them fresh.

They should be refrigerated unwashed, in a plastic bag and may be kept for about a week. They store most successfully at a temperature of about 45-50 degrees F. Unwaxed cucumbers can easily lose moisture so keep them wrapped tightly in plastic. Wash thoroughly just before using. Cut cucumbers can be refrigerated, tightly wrapped from 3 to 5 days.

Preparation and Use: Fresh cucumbers are a favorite in green salads and on relish trays. They are generally served raw and sliced or diced in any number of ways. Leaving the peel on is optional and adds color and interest. Removing seeds is also optional. Add a decorative touch to your vegetable platter by running the tines of a fork down the entire length of the cucumber, penetrating the peel. Then slice crosswise. They may also be shredded and mixed with dill and sour cream for a refreshing dip or sauce. Although few people cook cucumbers, this can be done successfully as you would a summer squash. Select small fresh cucumbers for pickles. Wax-coated cucumbers are not suitable because the brine cannot penetrate the wax.

Recipes:

Chilled Cucumber Soup

5 cucumbers	1 quart buttermilk
Salt	1 pint plain low fat yogurt
6 scallions, chopped	salt and freshly ground pepper
2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill	1/2 cup chopped parsley
1/4 cup fresh lemon juice	

Peel cucumbers and cut them in half, scraping out seeds. Sprinkle cucumbers with salt and let them stand 30 minutes. Drain excess water. Chop cucumbers coarsely and put pieces in the blender along with scallions, dill, lemon juice, buttermilk and yogurt. Blend at high speed. Season with salt and pepper. Garnish with chopped parsley. Chill well before serving. Serves 6.

Cucumber Onion Salad

2 cucumbers, washed, peeled and sliced thin	1/2 cup sugar
1 large onion, sliced and ringed	1/2 teaspoon salt
	1/2 cup white vinegar

Combine sliced onions and sliced cucumbers in a glass bowl. Bring sugar, salt and vinegar to boil. Immediately pour over onions and cucumbers and cover. Refrigerate. Best if made at least a day ahead.

Bread and Butter Pickles

2 pounds medium size pickling cucumbers (12-15)	2 teaspoons mustard seed
5 cups thinly sliced onions (5-6)	1 1/2 teaspoons ground ginger
1/2 cup salt	1 teaspoon ground turmeric
3 cups water	3 cups distilled white vinegar
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar	2 cloves garlic

Wash cucumbers; cut crosswise into 1/8 inch slices. Combine with onions in large crock or nonmetallic container. Dissolve salt in water; pour over vegetables. Weigh vegetables down with a plate almost as large as the crock. Lay a large jar filled with water on the plate to keep vegetables under brine. Let stand 2 hours. Combine sugar and remaining ingredients in large pot; bring to boil, remove garlic. Drain vegetables; add to hot syrup, heat just to boiling. Simmer while quickly packing one clean jar at a time. Fill to within 1/2 inch of top making sure vinegar solution covers vegetables. Cap each jar at once. Process in boiling water bath 5 minutes. Makes 3-4 pints.

Cucumber Boats

2 cucumbers	2 tablespoons chopped stuffed olives
2 1/2 cups cooked diced shrimp	1/2 cup low fat mayonnaise
1/2 cup chopped celery	Salt and pepper to taste

Peel and cut cucumbers in half lengthwise. Hollow out the center using a melon ball cutter, to make boats. Combine shrimp, chopped celery, olives and cucumber pieces with 1/2 cup mayonnaise, salt and pepper. Pile in cucumber boats and garnish with whole peeled shrimp.