

MARCH: STEMS

Have you heard of vegetables called **stems**? I bet you have and just do not know it! **Stem vegetables** are plants in which the above-the-ground stems, shoots, or stalks are used for food. These vegetables include asparagus, celery, rhubarb, and others that are grown for their stalks.

CHECK OUT SOME OF THE MOST POPULAR VARIETIES OF STEMS DESCRIBED BELOW!

ASPARAGUS

Asparagus, a healthy stem vegetable, was loved by the ancient Greeks but it was the Romans who first cultivated it. Asparagus is rich in vitamins C & E, folate, fiber and potassium, and can be found in green and white varieties. Green asparagus is the most common in the US, while the white is most popular in Europe.

Selecting: When selecting asparagus, choose firm yet tender stalks (for the green variety of asparagus, choose stalks with deep green or purplish tips that are closed and compact).

Storage: Store stalks, with bottoms wrapped in a damp paper towel, in the crisper section of the refrigerator; if you don't have a crisper, put the ends in plastic bags and place in the coldest part of the refrigerator. It is best to eat asparagus the day it is purchased, because the flavor lessens with each passing day.

Preparation: Remember to wash asparagus in cool running water and snap off the tough, course end of the asparagus at its natural breaking point (or use a peeler to remove the outer layer of the asparagus to make it tender). White asparagus needs to be cooked until completely tender, while the green variety can be stir-fried, lightly steamed, or cooked in the microwave.



CELERY

Celery, another very healthy stem vegetable, has its roots way back in sixteenth century northern European history. It is fun to eat because it is crunchy and tasty, and like asparagus, celery is full of important nutrients such as vitamin C, potassium, folate, and fiber.

Selecting: Celery is available year round. Choose celery that is compact in shape with light green stalks and leaves.

Storage: Celery should be refrigerated in a plastic bag and placed in the crisper for up to two weeks.

Preparation: Rinse celery thoroughly to remove any dirt that is often lodged between the ribs. If the ribs of the celery are wilted, separate the ribs and place them in a bowl of ice water for several minutes before use. It can be consumed raw or in cooked form.



Stems Tips

- Add chopped **celery** to spinach salads, tossed green salads, whole wheat pasta salads, soups, or to stir-fried dishes for yummy flavor and a healthy dose of fiber and vitamins!
- For a quick and easy side dish, brush **asparagus** spears with extra virgin olive oil and then grill for a couple minutes on each side, add salt and pepper (maybe a few hot pepper flakes) to taste!
- Try adding chopped **asparagus** to your favorite stir fry and casserole recipes.
- For a fun nutritious after-school snack, make some “ants on a log” – fill the inside of raw **celery** (the “log”) with peanut butter, then place raisins along the top of the peanut butter as “ants.”
- **Celery** is a great portable snack – clean and cut some pieces to throw in a baggie - put it in your lunchbox, purse, or briefcase (along with some spreadable cheese for a boost of protein).

Stems Recipe!

ASPARAGUS WITH LEMON – A QUICK HEALTHY SIDE DISH!

Makes 4 serving

Ingredients

- 2 lbs **asparagus**, tough ends trimmed off
- 2 tsp extra virgin olive oil
- 2 Tbsp lemon juice

Place asparagus in steamer basket in a pot over boiling water. Cover pot and steam 5 minutes or until bright green and tender. Rinse asparagus under cold water to stop it from cooking further, and then drain thoroughly. Combine oil and lemon juice in a bowl. Pour over asparagus. Season with pepper to taste and serve at room temperature if desired.

Stems Recipes!

ROASTED ASPARAGUS – A SAVORY SIDE!

Makes 4 servings

Ingredients

- 2 lbs **asparagus**, tough ends trimmed off
- 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 2 Tbsp grated parmesan cheese
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Cut asparagus into 1 to 2 inch sections, slicing at a slight diagonal. Place on baking sheet. Drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with cheese, salt and pepper to taste. Roast in the oven for 10 minutes.

LENTIL PILAF WITH CELERY

Makes 8 serving

Ingredients

- Nonstick cooking spray
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 1 cup chopped **celery**
- 1 cup chopped green bell pepper
- 1 cup sliced fresh mushrooms
- 1 cup water
- 1 ½ cup uncooked lentils
- ½ tsp. garlic powder
- 16 oz. can low sodium chicken broth
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup uncooked brown rice

Coat a large saucepan with cooking spray. Place over medium heat and add onion, celery, bell pepper, and mushrooms, sautéing until tender. Add water, lentils, garlic powder, and chicken broth, bringing to a boil. Cover and reduce heat. Simmer for 20 minutes and add rice; simmer until rice is done, (about 30-40 minutes) and lentils are tender.