

## (בַּזִּילִיקוּם) רִיחָן – Basil – *Ocimum Basilicum*

### Basil: Soul Reviving, Gentle Plant of Peace

Everyone entering our mini greenhouse, is enchanted by the sweet scented, peaceful presence of basil growing there during the warm season from April to October. Basil belongs to the genus *Ocimum*, derived from the Greek *ozo*, meaning 'to be fragrant.' Also its Hebrew name רִיחָן/*reichan* derives from the word for 'fragrance.' Basil, a native to India, belongs to the Lamiaceae family together with the mints and shares their characteristic square, hairy stem, labiate flowers and opposite leaves. It's rich, spicy fragrance is reminiscent of other mints with a hint of clove. There are many varieties of basil, with different forms of leaves, dimensions and scents. Some of them have lemon or cinnamon scent and there are varieties with purple leaves, but majority have green leaves. The fragrance of basil is warming, stimulating and brings a sense of peace. It can be used improve focus and memory and enhance our general mood. Its scent may help brainstorm solutions to problems in the family and to bring about peaceful resolutions and harmonious cooperation. After arguing with a loved one, take some time to calm down while sipping some basil tea. Then you'll be prepared to return to the conversation and settle the dispute peacefully. You can also serve meals laced with basil during times of family strife and argument to help with reconciliation and peacekeeping. There is a practice of Sephardi women, (perhaps also some men) to pass around sprigs of basil in the synagogue during the service. Especially on Yom Kippur, there is a custom to bring basil sprigs to the Beit Knesset to complete reciting one hundred blessings and revive the soul. Jewish lore holds that basil offers strength during fasting (Tova Navarra [The Encyclopedia of Vitamins, Minerals, and Supplements](#) p. 25). The fragrance of basil is intended to strengthen congregants' energy. At Yemenite Yom Kippur services there are usually beautiful bunches of basil. Also in other religions basil has traditionally been used to expel bad thoughts, obtain forgiveness, purify the soul and receive blessings. But basil is not just for fast days. Old-time Yemenites carry sprigs of basil when visiting friends to enjoy its divine aroma. The fragrance of basil improve the overall energy of a space, while bringing about a sense of peace. In a place of business, the scent of basil encourages more customers while relieving tension and weariness among employees.



### Can You Grow Basil for Pesto During the Sabbatical Year?

More than a decade ago, Yochanan, the dorm father or 'Farmer John' as the students endearingly called him, built our mini greenhouse. I needed this little greenhouse primarily to provide my family with organic greens during shemita (Sabbatical) year, but also as a more protected bug-free environment at all times for my basil and parsley. Little did I know the detailed requirements for how strictly detached from the ground the plants grown during the shemita year need to be. I thought, since our greenhouse had tiled floor, and the plants grow in shelved, wooden boxes more than ten hand's-breadths above the ground, all was good to go. While looking forward to continue growing basil for pesto during shemita year, I was in for an unpleasant surprise when we began learning the laws of growing indoor plants on shemita. During the seventh year the land must rest just as we are required to rest every Shabbat. Indoor plants are not disturbing this rest as long as they are detached from the ground on windowsills, shelves or tables. In order for the plants to be considered detached from the ground they also need to grow in pots or boxes small enough for a regular person to carry when filled with dirt and plants. And here came our problem. The planter-boxes in our greenhouse are attached to the ground and immovable. Furthermore, they are quite

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large. Even if they could be detached they are way too heavy for any person but a Samson to carry. So we have to do serious remodeling before next shemitah – four more years to go!

### **Basil – The Plant of Love**

The scent of basil resonates with the element of fire and stimulates the heart energy center. A live basil plant is a very common gift to newly married couples to bring love and peace in the home. Basil is also a symbol of love to the Italians. Its pleasant fragrance is said to make women more attractive to men. A basil plant placed on a balcony meant that the woman who lived there was ready to receive suitors. In India, basil is one of the holy plants, like the sacred lotus – hence the name, 'Holy Basil.' It is considered a Hindu symbol of love, fidelity, eternal life, purification and protection with the ability to remedy headaches, low energy, stress, disease and sexual dysfunction. A family is not considered a real Hindu family if the mother doesn't grow basil in her garden or home. Holy basil is used for the Hindu idol-worshipping festival that opens the season when weddings are allowed in India. In various traditions, a gift of basil given to a member of the opposite sex, affects him or her to fall deeply in love with the giver and be forever faithful. In Romania, this act is representative of an official engagement. There, basil is the most loved plant, mentioned in poetry, folk songs and literature, because it is the symbol of love and good luck. According to their tradition, its pungent scent has the power to help the love life of those who smell it or wear little branches of it. Besides its purifying qualities, the Romanians believe that the basil is first of all the plants of love due to its aphrodisiac properties. Therefore it is an erotic symbol for fulfillment in love, marriage and fertility. Due to the belief that basil increases the power of attraction and the chances to meet the soulmate, single girls put a branch of basil under their pillow at certain auspicious times. In villages, when the girls and boys go to local folk dances, they wear a little branch of basil behind their ear, or close to their heart to attract their soulmate. Romanian rituals before weddings use a wooden bottle beautifully decorated with branches and flowers of basil and a bouquet of basil dipped in water, which the bride sprinkles on the single boys and girls as a spiritual remedy for finding love and getting married. May the scent of basil purify our soul and its touch of love embrace our heart when we bend down to inhale its heavenly fragrance.

### **Medicinal Properties of Basil**

Besides its culinary qualities, basil has amazing medicinal properties. It contains magnesium, vitamins, antioxidants and antibacterial substances, improves blood circulation, respiratory disorders and digestion. In Indian traditional medicine (Ayurveda) basil is considered a plant that balances the energy centers, biological functions and body processes. It has a mild sedative action, enhances adrenal function, physical and mental endurance and is also useful for nervous headaches, anxiety and stress. In addition, basil contains phytochemicals considered to be anti-cancerous and to help control blood sugar levels in diabetics.

### **Contains Powerful Antioxidants that May Help Fight Cancer**

Basil contains two important flavonoid antioxidants, known as orientin and viceninare, which help protect white blood cells responsible for immune function, as well as cellular structures where DNA is stored. Studies in the journal of *Nutrition and Cancer* state that basil contains phytochemicals that may be able to naturally help prevent cancer! Using basil extract can be beneficial as a supplemental cancer treatment even when someone is already undergoing traditional forms of treatments.

### **Contains Antibacterial & Antimicrobial Properties**

Herbs like basil contain essential oil compounds helping them to defend themselves from predators like bugs, rodents and strains of bacteria in the soil. When we ingest these protective oils, we

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experience similar benefits: a boost in immunity and protection from disease. Basil extract has even been shown to help in inhibiting resistant strains of bacteria that don't respond to antibiotics. Basil essential oil has been found to exhibit anti-microbial activity against a wide range of bacteria, yeasts, molds, infections and viruses. Thus it protects against the candida virus and various forms of skin irritations.

### **Acts as an Anti-inflammatory**

Basil contains powerful essential oils, including eugenol, citronellol and linalool. These enzyme-inhibiting oils help lower inflammation.

### **Helps Protect from Diabetes and Metabolic Syndrome**

Basil extracts have been found to reduce blood sugar levels and inflammation, which makes basil protective against diabetes and other forms of metabolic syndrome. Additionally, benefits of basil essential oils include the ability to help lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels, which diabetic patients are at a higher risk of developing.

**Relieves Stress & Fights Depression** Studies have now shown that basil may have the ability to act as an adaptogen to help the body more efficiently handle stress and to normalize the harmful effects of stressors on bodily processes. Basil is also considered an antidepressant since it can positively impact brain function within the adrenal cortex, helping stimulate neurotransmitters that regulate the hormones responsible for making us happy and energetic.

**Promotes Cardiovascular Health** Both as an antioxidant and anti-inflammatory, basil helps the muscles that control blood vessel contract and relax, promoting healthy blood pressure. It helps prevent dangerous platelet aggregation, clumping together of blood platelets that can form a clot within the arteries and cause cardiac arrest.

### **Supports Liver Function & Helps Detoxify**

Basil facilitate the body's ability to produce detoxifying enzymes, higher antioxidant defenses and a reduction of fat buildup in the liver thus helping to prevent liver disease.

### **Helps Alkalize the Body and Improve Digestion**

Basil helps balance acid within the body and restore the body's proper pH level. This can improve digestion and immunity by facilitating healthy bacteria flourish within the gut microflora, while also decreasing harmful bacteria that can cause disease. Basil tea after a meal is used to aid digestion, prevent flatulence, calm the stomach, alleviate abdominal cramping and acid reflux.

### **A Natural Aphrodisiac**

The aroma of basil is believed to increase libido and arousal, possibly by increasing blood flow and energy levels, while reducing inflammation. In Ayurveda practices, holy basil is considered the 'elixir of life' and is used to promote healthy sexual function and an upbeat mood.

### **Household Use**

Basil makes wonderful potpourris, herbal sachets and dried bouquets. Use it in the Sukkah to keep flies and mosquitoes away. The antifungal and antibacterial properties of basil make it useful in making household cleaners. The essential oil added to a floor wash, or the fresh herb infused into vinegar then added to a floor wash is a great way to use basil's energy and fragrance. It is also gently anti-bacterial so you get a house cleaning bonus.

## Culinary Uses

Basil is one of the most well-loved and commonly consumed herbs. It has the ability to add a nice Italian flare, especially to tomatoes dishes, and tastes amazing added to a freshly made [vegan pizza](#). Basil is popular not only in Italian cuisine, but also in Asian – Indian, Thai and Vietnamese cuisine where it is also used to flavor liqueurs; and make mixed drinks. I use basil in numerous ways: In pesto, green smoothies, with sautéed vegetables; to flavor organic meat, fish and stews; as part of dressings and in herbal teas. Fresh, dried basil and oil-infused basil, combined with garlic, cheese, vinegars and nuts are all ways to add basil flavor to dishes and experience its benefits. The best sandwich in the world consists of soft goat cheese spread on sourdough whole wheat toast with several slices of fresh, homegrown tomatoes and fresh basil leaves.

## Hands On

Harvest basil on a warm, sunny day, just after the dew has dried and just before the flowers form. Pinch off leaves as needed once the plant is strong enough to handle it. If taking a large harvest, leave at least two shoots intact. It will grow back in a few weeks.

Hang upside in bunches or lay flat on drying rack to dry. Ensure proper ventilation to reduce the chance of mold. Store in an airtight container away from heat or light for up to one year. The flavor of dried basil is not as good as fresh basil. To maintain better flavor, chop fresh basil and freeze in ice cubes to drop into sauces. Use within one year. You can also freeze whole leaves in a plastic bag. Rub the leaves with olive oil before freezing.

## Basic Basil Pesto

A hefty bunch of basil  
 3-4 Cloves of garlic  
 ¼ Cup virgin olive oil  
 ½ Tablespoon sea-salt

1. Soak basil leaves in water with veggie-wash for 3 minutes.
2. Clean off all soap and rinse in filtered water.
3. Squeeze out water from leaves and remove hard, woody stems.
4. Place in food-processor together with remaining ingredients.
5. Process with the S-blade until smooth.

If you add more olive oil the pesto becomes thinner more like a dressing. You can adapt amounts of salt and garlic to taste.

## Basil Tomato Pesto

1 Cup sun-dried tomatoes  
 2 Cups loosely packed fresh basil  
 2 Cloves garlic  
 ¼ Cup pine nuts or sunflower seeds  
 ¼ Cup olive oil  
 (¼ Cup grated raw cheese (optional))

1. Place all ingredients in food-processor.
2. Process with the S-blade until creamy.

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