

EPAZOTE



Like most herb crops grown in the Yuma area, epazote acreage is small yet significant. Not many producers are aware of this importance and popularity of this herb in most Latin and Mexican dishes.

Epazote is used as a leaf vegetable and herb for its pungent flavor. Raw, it has a resinous, medicinal pungency, similar to the licorice taste of anise, fennel, or even tarragon, but stronger. Epazote's fragrance is strong, but difficult to describe. It has been compared to citrus, petroleum, savory, mint and putty.

Although it is traditionally used with black beans for flavor and its carminative properties, it is also sometimes used to flavor other traditional Mexican dishes as well. Epazote can be used to season quesadillas, soups, mole de olla, eggs and potatoes and enchiladas.

A Mexican herb that has a very strong taste and sometimes has a gasoline or a perfume type odor, epazote has been used in Mexican cuisine for thousands of years dating back to the Aztecs who used it for cooking as well as for medicinal purposes.

Epazote has been used in moderation to help relieve abdominal discomfort (gassiness) that can come from eating beans. It has become a distinct flavor in Mexican cuisine and is now used to season a variety of dishes including beans, soups, salads and quesadillas.

The older leaves have a stronger flavor and should be used sparingly. Younger leaves have a milder, yet richer flavor.

Epazote grows well in tropical and sub-tropical climates and will reach a height of over 3 feet. It grows in the wild in Mexico and America and you may even have it growing in your own backyard. It is hearty and sometimes is referred to as a weed.

Epazote can be found in many Latin markets or Hispanic grocery stores. There are many places online that sell dried epazote which is a satisfactory alternative if fresh is not available.

It also known as wormseed because of it's effects on preventing worms in animals. It is often added to animal feed for this reason.

While epazote sounds somewhat exotic, the other names for this Mexican herb are less appealing. Consider skunkweed, pig weed, wormseed or goosefoot. And then there is the fact that the word epazote comes from the Aztec words 'epatl' and 'tzotl' meaning smelly animal. Mexican tea is a nicer name as is the botanical *Chenopodium ambrosioides*.

Native to Central America, especially Mexico and Guatemala, epazote is common to those cuisines. It is most often used fresh in these regions to flavor beans, corn and fish. The strongly scented herb is said to help avoid the gastric discomfort that sometimes occurs after eating beans. Ancient Aztecs used epazote both medicinally and as a culinary herb.

The taste is strong as well, slightly bitter with hints of lemon. It is often compared to cilantro as both are acquired tastes. While epazote has no comparable substitute, many have found using Mexican oregano in its place provides pleasing results.

You might find fresh epazote for sale at Mexican grocery stores. It is recommended to store the fresh stems in a glass of water, like a bouquet of flowers, or refrigerated wrapped in damp paper towels.

Dried epazote is available chopped or as whole stems. Recipes will occasionally call for a stem of epazote--roughly equal to a teaspoon of the dried chopped product.

It is easy to grow your own epazote if you like it enough to want a steady supply. The shrubby plant is an annual with large leaves with pointed with serrated edges while the flowers are tiny clusters of green balls. The crushed leaves are said to send ants scattering if placed in their path.

If you buy dried epazote for your own kitchen you may notice that some pieces seem rather woody. You can pick these tough stems out or try pulverizing it further with a mortar and pestle. The dried herb does soften plenty with extended cooking.

Epazote is an abundant weed in Mexico and parts of northern South America. There, its bitter, musky, lemon flavor is used to spice up everything from beans and squash to pork and crab cakes. Young leaves can be wilted and added to soups or stews or combined with other greens, just as chicory or sorrel would be used in early spring. It is often used with other herbs, like Mexican Oregano and Cilantro, and, of course, chilies.

Since pre-Colombian times, epazote has been used as a culinary herb and for medicinal purposes to expel worms, kill parasites, increase perspiration and urination, stimulate digestion and as a natural remedy for cramps among many other uses.

It has been said that you can get addicted to epazote's taste and it is poisonous in large quantities, but only a leaf or two to give your dishes a delicious twist of flavor. Next time you come across epazote give this stinky herb a try. A little bit won't hurt you and you might find a very nice and flavorful surprise in your dishes.

Epazote is used internally for roundworms, hookworms, small tapeworms, amebic dysentery, asthma, excess mucus. And, it has been used externally for athlete's foot and insect bite.

In Central American countries the leaves are used to flavor corn, bean, and fish dishes and were used in this manner by the Mayans of the Yucatan.

Has insecticidal properties and is used as a fumigant against mosquitoes and in fertilizer to inhibit insect larvae.

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