The Sweet Tooth Dilemma

Healthy Options that Taste Good, Too!

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Have you ever searched your kitchen for something sweet to eat, knowing that you recently tossed out the blatantly sugar-laden treats in your pantry? Feeling desperate, you look for that mostly consumed bag of chocolate chips you bought for baking — a few chocolate morsels might be just the thing to stave off your sweet tooth craving. Unfortunately, you tossed those, too. Clearly,it is time to bring out re-enforcements. You throw open the freezer door for one final scan and bingo. Something catches your eye. But wait…frozen blueberries?

Blueberries, fresh or frozen, are one of the most delicious and nutritious alternative options for dessert — or for any meal of the day. One of the few fruits native to North America, blueberries are packed with antioxidants as well as vitamin K, manganese, vitamin C, copper and fiber. Recent studies have also shown that consuming two cups of blueberries daily improved cognitive function including memory. According to ScienceDaily®, wild blueberries have been reported by a growing number of studies to exert a wide variety of protective health benefits. A new study at the University of Maine adds to this growing body of evidence.

The new research, published in Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism, shows that regular long-term wild blueberry diets may help improve or prevent pathologies associated with the metabolic syndrome, including cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Blueberries can be dressed up any number of ways for dessert, but the most nutritious way to eat them is uncooked. Eat them plain or accompanied by a dollop of non-fat Greek yogurt and a drizzle of local, organic honey or real maple Grade B syrup (Grade B syrup, harvested later in the season, has more minerals and a richer flavor than Grade A which is harvested early in the season). Or, blend blueberries with other seasonal berries or a quarter cup of home-made, low-sugar granola, or a few walnuts.

Dates are a wonderful way to curb one's sweet tooth, eaten alone or with raw walnuts or almonds. The Coachella Valley has a smorgasbord of date growers, including Shields Date Garden with 13 different varieties from which to choose. Dates are loaded with potassium and are a good source of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fiber.

Organic, unsweetened applesauce with added fruit or nuts and a sprinkling of cinnamon is a reliable sweet tooth charmer. Or, eat a whole, crisp, organic apple.

Blended, whole fruit (fresh or frozen) smoothies with ice and skim milk (almond, soy or rice), flax seed, and a modest amount of sweetener like honey, agave nectar or real maple syrup make a delicious warm weather dessert. Avoid using fruit juice in your smoothies. Most processed fruit juice is loaded with sugar. Try freezing smoothie blend in Popsicle® containers for a frosty, kid-friendly treat.

Any fresh fruit combo is a wonderful way to enjoy a healthy dessert. Choose seasonal bests, like creamy mangos or papayas and fresh limes during spring and summer. Baked apples or pears, combined with toasted walnuts, and nutmeg or cinnamon, are also tasty options.

Dark chocolate — chocolate lovers can enjoy a moderate amount of dark chocolate — but check for at least 70 percent cacao to reap the most benefits from this antioxidant-rich bit of heaven.

Dessert in moderation is a good approach when you want to have an occasional dessert that doesn't qualify for the healthy option category. Consider sharing your dessert or divide it in half to enjoy on the following day. But as a general rule, remember to include healthy options in your daily meal and dessert plan. The more often you eat whole, organic fruits and nuts, the better you'll feel.

The Internet offers an enormous variety of alternative dessert ideas. Try new recipes, new fruits and new sweeteners. Before long, your taste buds will experience a love affair with non-traditional desserts. To your good health and well-being!

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