

Herb of good health

The weed-like herb known as chives or cive is an excellent introduction to the delights of the garlic and onion – and, from all accounts, the more you have the healthier you are. Chives are credited with strengthening the stomach, combating high blood pressure, having a tonic effect on the kidneys and stimulating the appetite (every invalid should have some each day). They also reduce the indigestibility of fats – a boon for anyone watching their cholesterol levels.

Chives which are also related to leeks and shallots, are a good source of vitamin C, are rich in sulphur and iron and contain some vitamin A and one of the B vitamins. The great thing about the herb is that you get all the goodness because it is rarely cooked and when it is, it is for such a short time that there's no danger of all the value being leached out. Their original source is thought to be Asia (they are mentioned in early Chinese writings) but today they grow well in most countries

Left: Chives – strands of flavour and goodness. Just scissor-snip to use or to freeze

and are a popular flavouring in many European cuisines.

There are two types. Onion chives is the grass-like perennial. It produces little pink flowers, but cut them off if you want the plant for culinary use. Keep scissor-snipping the leaves and the plant will grow bushier. This chive often falls foul of the enthusiastic autumn gardener preparing the soil for the winter. As the plant dies down it looks even more like weeds, so indicate its presence with a warning marker if you want the plant to revive in the spring. If the tips should yellow, the plant needs nutrients – growing comfrey nearby will help, and chives also seem to like coffee grounds; spread them on the soil nearby.

Garlic chives have flatter leaves and the flowers are white. They have a mild garlic flavour and can be used just as the onion chives – raw, in salads, sauces and all savoury dishes. They make a pretty border in a garden but they have another value as well – as a deterrent to aphids. So, if you grow roses, plant the garlic chives in between.

Chives are not bought dried as they yellow too easily, but can be bought commercially frozen, often mixed with parsley. To freeze chives at home, wash them, then scissor-snip them into usable portions and wrap in small foil parcels. They'll take up little space and give 6 months supply of summer flavour.

CHIVE BUTTER

Take 4oz (125g) unsalted butter out of refrigerator well before use, to allow it to soften. Wash and chop a handful of chives. Work the chives into the softened butter and add sea-salt and pepper. Form into a sausage shape. Wrap in foil and return to fridge, to allow to harden. Slice into thin discs to serve with dishes such as fish, scrambled eggs, and omelettes.

