

The Wonder of Walnuts

By Kay Bushnell

The most common walnut today is the “Persian walnut, *Juglans regia*, which probably originated in south-central Asia several thousand years ago. By the time Pompeii fell under the ash of Vesuvius 2,000 years ago walnuts had made their way to what is now southern Italy.

The tough and tasty black walnut is native to North America, but it is the Persian walnut that is cultivated commercially and widely available for eating and cooking. The Persian walnut arrived in California in the late 1700s with Franciscan friars. It thrived in the temperate climate of the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. In recent times, China has planted many thousands of walnut trees and has become a major competitor for American walnut farmers.

From September to November the hulls of walnuts begin to split, and the harvest begins. With the aid of machines the trees are shaken, their nuts gathered, hulled, and dried. Then they are sorted, sized, cracked, and packaged.

Walnuts are highly recommended by many physicians and dietitians because they contain heart healthy omega-3 fatty acids, nutrients that are also found in fish. Studies have shown that consuming the equivalent of a handful of walnuts each day can reduce cholesterol. Therefore, those who consume a healthful plant-based diet frequently include walnuts in their meals. Other plant foods that contain omega-3 fatty acids are flax seeds, tofu, canola oil, and leafy greens.

The fat in nuts is primarily monounsaturated, and research has shown that monounsaturated fats can help to lower overall cholesterol and improve the ratio of LDL and HDL cholesterol, thus lowering the risk of heart disease. The Harvard Heart Letter cautions that “no amount of nuts can offset a poor diet that is high in saturated fat” and recommends that “...nuts... be used creatively in place of meat in a diet that contains plenty of fruit, vegetables grains, and legumes.”

The rich taste and texture of walnuts enhances baked goods, main dishes, salads, appetizers, and confections. Walnuts and pecans make a delicious addition to holiday stuffings. Ground walnuts can be key ingredients in meatless burgers, loaves, and meatless “meat” balls. It’s easy to enrich baked goods by including some ground walnuts. Grind walnuts in a blender until very finely textured, turning off the blender before they become a paste. Then substitute the ground nuts for 1/8 to 1/4 of the amount of the flour called for in the recipe. Adding a tablespoon of cornstarch when blending the nuts will help to prevent them from clumping.

It doesn’t require much effort to sprinkle walnut halves or pieces into a vegetable or fruit salad such as a Waldorf salad. Pasta dishes are almost always more delicious with a topping of chopped walnuts. Roast the nuts first (in a 325° oven for 8-10 minutes) if you

want them to have a more intense flavor. Keep shelled, raw walnuts in a tight container in your freezer.