

April '21 EHF Newsletter

## **THE LORE AND CULTURE OF BASIL - *Ocimum basilicum***

*By Karen England, the Edgehill Herb Farmer.*

[www.edgehillherbfarm.blog](http://www.edgehillherbfarm.blog)



Sweet Basil Plant. Photo credit:

[Free picture: sweet basil plant, vegetable, vegetation \(pixnio.com\)](https://pixnio.com)

The botanical name for basil comes from the Greek word *Okimon*, meaning, "smell", and the Greek word *basilikon*, meaning "king". From these origins, we call Basil - "the King of

herbs"! (Probably because calling it "Basil - the smelly King" does not have the same ring to it . . .) Basil was honored as Herb of the Year™ in 2003 by the [International Herb Association](#) of which Karen England is a proud member-at-large.

Basil is native to Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean and South America, and comes in annual and perennial forms.

Basil blossom. Photo credit: [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)



In the Victorian language of flowers "common basil" means hatred (egad!) and "sweet basil" means love and good wishes (oh joy!). When basil was used in a tussie-mussie, the name for the Victorian herb and flower bouquet made to send messages in the floral language, it was important that the correct basil variety be used or the recipient might get the wrong message. I think I'll stick to email for messaging and just eat my basil.

The last stanza of John Keats (1795-1821)

poem *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* reads . . .

"...Imploring for her Basil to the last..". Photo credit;

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*"And so she pined, and so she died forlorn,*

*Imploring for her Basil to the last.*

*No heart was there in Florence but did  
mourn*

*In pity of her love, so overcast.*

*And a sad ditty of this story born*

*From mouth to mouth through all the  
country pass'd: Still is the burthen sung – 'O  
cruelty',*

*'To steal my Basil-pot away from me!'" ...*

. . . thus, finishing a gruesome tale of love and murder rivaling a modern soap opera. Other basil lore involves basil as a breeding ground for scorpions, and a magic basil patch that held lost pieces of Christ's crucifix. In some countries, basil seeds must be sown while stamping and swearing! Possibly to ward off scorpions? Who knows!

This "Basil King" is quite the "drama queen" of the herb world.

The general information available on growing Sweet Basil, *Ocimum basilicum*, states that the plant is an annual in need of full sun and "in general" this is true, however, in parts of sunny southern California, like Vista, where I live, it actually grows best in half-day sun, not the recommended all day or "full sun", and it is a short-lived perennial, growing and producing for several years. This is because there is no frost or snow to kill the plants in this climate and basil rewards for it by living for several years. If you live in an area with freezing temperatures then the "general info" will apply to you, and you should grow basil plants in full sun in order to maximize plant growth before your weather kills it. I grow on average each year, about six varieties of basil, on the east side of the house, in a garden bed, a portion of which gets morning and early afternoon sun and then shade from the house in the late afternoon. As the basil plants set flower heads, something they are very prone to do, I pinch some of the flowers into my morning scrambled egg, afternoon sandwich and evening salads almost daily in order to encourage new growth, but I purposefully do not harvest all the flowers; I leave some for the bees and the finches to enjoy.

Basil is full of trace nutrients, especially iron. I am particularly happy to know that it is also a good source of magnesium, which is linked with helping migraine sufferers, which is something I suffer from, and I eat basil not only for flavor but also for health.

Every time I harvest fresh bunches for cooking, I take a few stems from each plant and that way no one plant is over pillaged for pesto, herb vinegar or other basil rich dish. Although I prefer to cook with fresh basil, I often cook with dried basil as well, depending on my mood and availability,

sometimes I use both fresh and dried in the same recipe. The “cooking with basil rule of thumb” is - dry basil goes into a dish, such as a soup or stew, at the beginning of cooking and fresh basil goes in at the last moment before serving. Try it and enjoy basil’s many flavors.

Here is one of my favorite recipes using fresh basil -



Corn pudding, a Thanksgiving side dish must have! Photo credit: [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

## **KAREN ENGLAND’S BASIL CORN PUDDING**

*Adapted from a '90's issue of Victoria magazine.*

No Thanksgiving feast for our family would be complete without corn pudding with fresh basil.

4 large ears of corn

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup grated cheddar cheese

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup fresh basil leaves, lightly packed

6 large eggs

1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups cream, half n' half, or evaporated non-fat milk

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon Tabasco, or to taste

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon sea salt

Freshly ground pepper, seasoned pepper and sugar, to taste

Preheat oven to 350°.

Grease a 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  quart casserole dish. Cook the corn on the cob and cut the cooked kernels off, discarding the cobs. Slice the basil very thinly (this is known as a "chiffonade"). Combine the corn, cheese and basil in the prepared casserole dish.

In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs and stir in the remaining ingredients. Pour the mixture over the corn and cheese. Put the casserole in a large roasting pan and add enough hot water to come halfway up the casserole dish. Carefully put the "bain-marie" (name for a casserole in a water bath) into the oven and bake for 40 to 45 minutes until pudding is set and golden.

Makes 6 servings.



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The 2021 Herb of the Year™ this year is Parsley and it just so happens that parsley and basil are great herby friends! In fact, my favorite basil pesto recipe is by Emelie Tolley and parsley is the reason!

Grow parsley, the 2021 Herb of the Year™, from seeds or starts.



Basil Pesto with Parsley. Photo credit: [This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

## **EMELIE TOLLEY'S BASIL PESTO WITH PARSLEY**

2 cups fresh basil leaves

1/2 cup fresh parsley leaves

1/2 cup olive oil

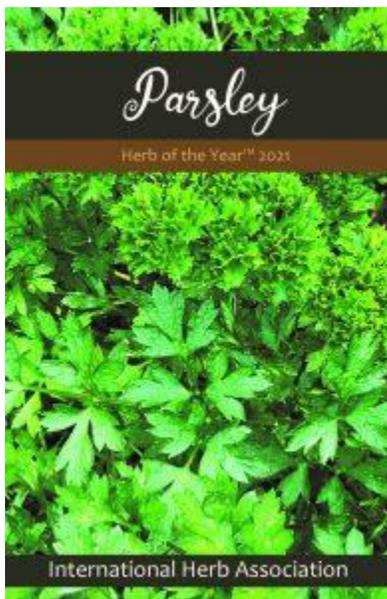
3 tablespoons pine nuts

2 garlic cloves, peeled  
¾ cup freshly grated parmesan cheese  
2 tablespoons soft butter  
Salt to taste

Puree the basil, parsley, olive oil, pine nuts and garlic in a food processor or blender (or use a Mortar and Pestle...). Mix the cheese and butter in by hand (see note). Season with salt to taste. If the pesto is too thick, just before serving add a spoonful or two of pasta cooking water or other liquid.

*Makes about 1 ½ cups.*

Note: If you are not going to use the pesto immediately, pour a thin layer of oil on top of the pesto and store it in the refrigerator. If you prefer to freeze it, add the cheese and butter after thawing.



In the 2021 Parsley HOY™ Book, IHA member and herbalist Susan Belsinger has included a similar basil with parsley Tuscan-style pesto recipe in her chapter on *Green Sauces: Parsley Plays a Leading Part*. Get your Parsley book here:

<https://edgehillherbfarm.blog/product/parsley-o-parsley-parsley-herb-of-the-year-2021/>

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