



Toast Pumpkin Seeds for Nutritious Treat

Pumpkins are one of the highpoints of the fall harvest. The fruit originated in Central America. Pumpkins – like cantaloupes, cucumbers and squash – belong to the Cucurbitaceae, or gourd family. Most of the pumpkins that are grown in the United States come from Illinois and become available in October.

Whole pumpkins and the carved pumpkin shell are often used as decorative items. The interior pulp is a nutritious addition to savory and sweet dishes, but don't throw out the seeds! Pumpkin seeds make a tasty snack that's low in calories, high in protein and rich in fiber, as well as vitamins B, E and K, and zinc, iron and magnesium. Pumpkin seeds also contain many beneficial fatty acids and amino acids.

The flat, dark-green pumpkin seeds, or pepitas as they are often called, are covered with a yellow-white husk. Pepitas are a key ingredient in Mexican recipes and are often used in the cuisines of many other cultures.

Toasted pumpkin seeds add a nutritious crunch when used as a topping for sauteed vegetables or salads. Grinding pumpkin seeds with garlic,

parsley or cilantro and adding olive oil and lemon juice to the mixture makes a wonderful salad dressing. Pumpkin seeds are also a delicious addition to oatmeal-raisin cookies or granola recipes.

Pumpkins seeds are a power-packed addition to sauces, soups and salads, and they're a healthy snack. Roasting and adding spices enhances their flavor. This recipe provides a few suggestions for preparing pumpkin seeds.



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TOASTED PUMPKIN SEEDS

- 1 pumpkin (field or sugar), about 2 cups
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons salt, plus more for sprinkling

Cooking oil spray

1. Cut a fresh, ripe pumpkin in half. Remove the membrane and seeds, and as much pulp as possible. Separate out seeds (leaving some of the pulp on adds to the flavor).

2. Do not rinse the seeds, as they will steam instead of toasting. Pick through the seeds and remove any that are split. Do not place the seeds on a paper towel, as seeds will stick to the paper. Instead, place seeds on a sheet of waxed or parchment paper, or on lightly oiled aluminum

foil. Heat oven to 300 F.

3. For Spicy Pumpkin Seeds, mix 1/2 teaspoon each of garlic powder, onion powder, salt, cumin, sugar and coriander and 1/4 teaspoon of cayenne pepper with the seeds before toasting.

4. For Sweet Pumpkin Seeds, mix 3 tablespoons of dark brown sugar and 1/4 teaspoon of salt with the seeds before toasting.

5. Spread the vegetable oil on a shallow pan. Sprinkle seeds over oil in single layer. Bake 10 minutes, stir and spray with the cooking oil spray. Bake for another 10 to 15 minutes, stir and spray with the cooking oil spray. Bake for an additional 10 to 15 minutes as needed or until lightly browned, being careful not to burn them.

6. Remove from the oven and sprinkle with salt. The seeds will become crispier as they cool. Shell the seeds, or for more fiber, eat them whole. Store in an airtight container.

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Angela Shelf Medearis is an award-winning children's author, culinary historian, and the author of seven cookbooks. Please join The Kitchen Diva in supporting Mattress Firms' efforts to assist foster children through the Ticket to Dream Foundation to make a positive impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of foster children in need. They believe not everyone can be a foster parent, but anyone can help a foster child. (www.tickettodream.org)

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