

# VILLAGE VIEW

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Colonial housewives, like modern-day householders, grew herbs in their gardens and used herbs in cooking to enhance flavor of foods. Unlike present-day cooks, those of earlier centuries had none of the convenience foods which now make meal-preparation relatively quick and easy.

In early days of our country's settlement, salt was a precious commodity. The expression "worth his salt" was high praise indicating any person so described performed in admirable and respectable fashion.

There's no question that the addition of salt to foods enhances the flavors; so popular is salt that its over-use has created a well-publicized health hazard to mankind. And so ubiquitous is salt in prepared foods that people on low-sodium or salt-free diets find it difficult to buy any canned, frozen, or packaged foods that don't contain the substance.

Salt is an ingredient of almost every food item offered in supermarkets with the exception of fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats. There's salt in bread, cake, pie, and crackers; mayonnaise, ketchup, mustard, pickles, soy sauce, cheese, and canned or packaged meats; even some fresh foods like shell fish and celery contain, naturally, considerable salt. Sauces, salad dressings, and prepared mixes are liberally laced with salt.

As the medical profession has been advising the American public for years, we consume salt in quantities that threaten our health; over-consumption of salt is blamed for the prevalence of heart disease, America's Number One Killer.

In years past, before we depended so heavily on prepared foods, salt was added to food with a far more discriminate hand; it was expensive. Our tastes demanded less of it; other flavors introduced piquancy, flavors too little used in modern cuisine.

Just as Colonial kitchen gardens supplied cooks with a wide choice of herbs, Colonial kitchen cupboards, even in winter, provided cooks with non-salt flavors, for herbs lend themselves to drying and storing, retain richness long after their harvest, and can provide today, just as they have for centuries, taste treats to make meals more palatable. And herbs and spices are more healthful than salt.

Herbs offer modern cooks exciting adventures in preparing and serving foods. There are two ways to add herbs to your kitchen supplies. You can buy them at outrageous prices in those adorable little jars and cans on display in supermarkets and health food stores, or you can grow your own, dry and store them, and use them with a free hand since the cost of seed or even small plants is nominal.

Many herbs are perennial; that means they come up, year after year, and few are troubled by garden pests. Growing herbs is easy and fun whether in the herb garden or in pots on a sunny windowsill. Drying herbs is easy, too. You need a piece of screening and an airy dry area where the screen can remain undisturbed for a week or so. Alternatively, herb sprigs can be tied in bunches and hung up to dry.

Preserving herbs isn't hard. After rubbing the dried leaves between your palms and sifting out the woody stems, store the results in tightly-capped small jars marked with the name of the herb and the date. They retain their pungency for at least a year.

Cooking with fresh herbs insures success, for the plants' newly-cut leaves are used at the peak of their flavor. Dried herbs concentrate flavor, however, and only a quarter as much of a dried herb is required as when using the fresh plant.

Weaning your family from salt overdose may require imagination and experimentation, but a gradual approach will give best results. Don't expect to reverse taste habits in a week; a year is a safer goal, so start small.

Begin with familiar flavors and home-made specialties such as salad dressings, poultry stuffing, sauces and gravies. Introduce sweet butter, lightly-salted margarine, or soured cream for topping vegetables. If the people you cook for habitually salt their food before tasting it, fill the salt cellars with salt-substitute powders. You might try leaving even them in the kitchen cupboard at mealtimes.

Switch to fresh vegetables instead of canned or frozen ones, and experiment with vegetable mixtures of complimentary flavors, such as carrots with parsley, peas with chopped scallions, corn and lima beans, cauliflower and broccoli. Oil and vinegar salad dressing, lightly spiced with garlic or onion powder, oregano, black pepper, basil, and fresh parsley, can quickly become a family favorite.

Make a cottage cheese dip and serve with uncooked vegetables like carrot sticks, celery hearts, and wedges of turnip instead of potato chips or pretzels. For zip, mix a teaspoon of oregano, a quarter teaspoon each of thyme, marjoram, and basil, and one crushed garlic clove into a small tub of cottage cheese; stir and allow to ripen several hours in the fridge.

Baked fish filets need no salt at all; line a baking pan with foil, pour a little milk over the bottom, arrange the filets in a single layer, top them with a few thin slices of lemon, and sprinkle with crushed tarragon leaves, snipped parsley, and paprika. Bake just long enough to cook the fish through; fifteen minutes is enough for flounder; twenty for haddock.

Cut down on salt in water when you boil potatoes, vegetables, and pasta products. A well-spiced spaghetti sauce needs no salt; instead, add a tablespoon of sugar to a potful of sauce. Cheese, sliced or grated, is always salty and will provide enough to satisfy appetites, once your family grows accustomed to using less.

Avoid dried soup products to flavor casseroles or stews; they are heavily salted. Try a pinch of rosemary with chicken dishes, a smidgeon of curry powder and a shake of dried onion flakes in steamed rice. Flavor potato salad with tarragon vinegar, mashed hardboiled eggs, chopped raw onion, celery and green peppers; add dry mustard powder, pepper & oregano; use only a small amount of mayonnaise for binding. Combine the ingredients early in the day, or even a day ahead; refrigerate and allow the flavors to blend.

Skip the salt, or halve the amount you customarily use when preparing recipes your family likes. Make your own mustard using powdered mustard, enough vinegar for proper consistency, a little sugar, and a dash of pepper. If pickles and olives are favorite relishes, garnish plates with one or two slices of pickle or a couple of olives rather than putting a relish tray on the table. Better yet, offer orange slices with egg dishes, lemon wedges with fish, and parsley sprigs with meat.

Bland foods such as rice take on new character if chicken stock replaces cooking water; rice becomes positively lively served with chicken livers simmered in pineapple juice and a little grated ginger root and thickened with a bit of cornstarch. If the pineapple juice comes from a can of pineapple, toss in half-a-cup of the crushed fruit, too.

Experimenting with salt-free foods can open up a whole new gastronomic experience for creative cookery and challenge kings and queens of kitchen realms to experiments never dared in days when recipes were inviolate guides to food preparation.

If you're concerned about keeping your family members' blood pressure readings at healthy levels and preventing heart disease, lowering salt consumption is your primary aim. It may take imagination and innovation, but with remarkably little extra effort, you can do it.