

A FRONDNESS FOR FENNEL

A TASTY MULTIPURPOSER GROWS IN YOUR GARDEN

by Carol Penn-Romine



A large, gangly but pretty plant looms over my backyard with all the grace of a construction crane. Unwieldy yet delicate in its coat of feathery fronds, it sometimes gets in the way of my gardening chores, but its distinction as a tasty, perennial multitasker earns it the right to loiter there.

Fennel is a perfect fit here in our Southern California clime. It's a generous but low-maintenance plant, and because it's perennial I don't have to replant each year. Nothing makes me feel more Italian, down to my pale Northern European follicles, quite like having a fennel plant at my disposal. I can harvest several ingredients from it, all of them useful and tasty.

"If your garden has a wealth of fennel, pick greedily of the fronds and lay some into a roasted vegetable sandwich as a nice fresh contrast to the richness of the roasting."

It's the secret ingredient in the rich, red sauce of many an Italian grandmother, the component that gives a distinctively fresh flavor to the Florentine salami known as finocchiona and the key that enlivens so many Italian recipes for cookies and other sweets. One of the things I love most about fennel is that it is such an easy thing to use. A handful of chopped or sliced bulb, snipped fronds or crushed seeds tossed into the mix amps the flavor of scores of dishes. And the pollen makes a garnish that not only looks pretty but adds yet another layer of richness.

I started my own lovely green behemoth a few years ago with the purchase of a small potted fennel from the local garden center. While I give it an occasional sprinkle with the hose, for the most part I ignore it—that is, until I need something good to eat. Each year it is noticeably larger than it was the year before. Now it puts out an abundance of flowers, so I can easily harvest both pollen and seed (if you collect all the flowers for pollen you won't get any seed). I collect pollen in early summer and seed in late summer.

I didn't realize it at the time I bought my fennel plant, but it is a wild variety that doesn't actually produce bulbs. However, it does give me fronds, stalks, seed and pollen. Double check with someone at your gardening center to be sure of the type you're getting—since the bulb is a root, you likely won't see it poking up out of the pot. The bulb-bearing variety is usually labeled "Florence fennel" or "finocchio." The experts don't recommend growing wild fennel, since it is an aggressive plant that spreads rapidly. Mine has minded its manners since I've had it, and we've gotten along quite well so far, so I'm inclined to let it keep its little patch of real estate in my garden.

A member of the parsley family (certainly a more chi-chi member, I'd say!), fennel is sometimes mislabeled at the grocery, so if you see this plant with "anise" posted above it, go ahead and pick some up. It's fennel, and you want it. You really do. While you may hesitate to put fennel into a dish if you're not crazy about the flavor of licorice, keep in mind that comparisons to the black jellybean are inadequate—unfair, even. This plant has a much more delicate flavor, one that doesn't overpower a dish but rather enhances it (and it certainly won't turn your teeth an unflattering color!).

Fennel is tasty both raw and cooked. The easiest way to enjoy it is in a quick fennel salad, one of those dishes you can assemble to taste, no measurements required. Slice some fennel bulbs thinly and toss with thinly sliced red onion and some good olive oil, a splash of sherry vinegar, a sprinkling of salt and a few grinds of black pepper. Top it with shavings of fresh Parmigiano-Reggiano—or some pats of fresh goat cheese if you prefer—and you'll have a refreshing salad that provides a bright contrast to richer, heavier dishes. If you want to cut back on the amount of cheese you scatter over a pizza, try substituting some raw shaved fennel. It will give you an entirely different mouthfeel, of course, but the fresh flavor is a good foil for the heft of the pizza. Raw fennel is a winning accompaniment to just about any rich, heavy dish.



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When it comes to cooking the bulb, you have loads of options to consider. You can braise it, roast it, sauté it, grill it or cook it up in a gratin. Fennel is good alone and still plays well with other components in a soup, stew or sauce. Next time you make a red sauce for pasta, chop up a handful of fennel and toss it in when you sauté the onions. Give your sauce a double kick of flavor by including some fennel seed in addition to the fresh bulb. Toast them lightly first to bring out their full flavor.

While fennel's celery-like stalks are too tough to eat, they make the perfect aromatic platform on which to set your chicken, fish or roast before it goes into the oven. Fennel has an astringent quality that in particular tames the richness of oily fish, duck and pork.

The feathery fronds make a pretty garnish for soups and salads. If your garden has a wealth of fennel, pick greedily of the fronds and lay some into a roasted vegetable sandwich as a nice fresh contrast to the richness of the roasting. The fronds look nice in floral arrangements, too, so if your plant has gone completely crazy, pick a few extra bits of fennel greenery to tuck into a vase with fresh flowers. Ditto for its cheery yellow blooms. You can even pinch off the pollen for later use once the flowers have begun to fade.

Fennel seed pops up in both sweet and savory recipes of cuisines around the world. It is a part of Chinese five-spice and a component that gives an array of curry blends a wonderful richness. You'll find the seed in everything from German sauerkraut to Indian garam masala. It's also a key player in making an assortment of aperitifs and digestifs.

One of the most imaginative uses I've yet found for fennel seed is for making fennel ice cream (epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/Fennel-Ice-Cream-240251) The seeds are steeped in heavy cream and then strained out, so there's no grit in the final product. It pairs wonderfully with fresh fruit, and, believe it or not, it sings when topped with a drizzle of chocolate syrup or good-quality balsamic vinegar. And no surprise, it's lovely and satisfying all on its own.

And then there's the green seed, that is, the seed that comes between the pollen stage and the dry stage (technically it's classified as a fruit, but we'll not split hairs, OK?). When you bite into these tiny green pods, you get a fresh burst of fennel flavor. Toss a handful into your pasta sauce at service or stir some into your salad dressing.

As for the flavor of the pollen, I can only say this: If licorice wore a tiara, it would taste like fennel pollen. I know that sounds goofy, but words fail me in trying to describe the flavor of this golden fennelish wonder. There's a quality to it that I wouldn't call sweet, but the flavor is soft, golden and rich yet delicate. Floral, even. It inspires a cream soda-type sensation in the mouth, if that makes sense. But it's not for cooking—sprinkle the pollen from the flowers over a dish at the last minute, just before it hits the table. It helps round the fennel flavor in dishes in which you've cooked the bulb or seed.



So if the idea of a vegetable with the word "licorice" attached to it makes you back away, just remember words like "fresh" and "bright." And "versatile." Fennel wows with its possibilities. 🍴

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Potato, Leek and Fennel Soup

Makes about 6 1-cup servings

1 tablespoon butter

2 cups (about 10 ounces) fennel bulb, small dice

2 cups leek (about 3 medium), white part only, thinly sliced

2 cups (1 medium or 12 ounces) russet potato, peeled, medium dice

1 cup water

½ teaspoon salt, or to taste, depending on how much is in the chicken broth

¼ teaspoon fennel seeds, lightly toasted and crushed

White pepper, to taste

32 ounces (1 quart) of chicken broth (low-fat and low-sodium works just fine)

Fennel fronds to garnish

Melt butter in Dutch oven over medium heat. Add fennel and leek, and sauté for about five minutes, taking care not to let them brown. Add potato, fennel seeds, salt, broth and water, and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat and simmer until potato is just cooked through, about 20 minutes.

Pour about half of the soup into a blender, purée and pour the purée into another bowl; then repeat until all the soup is puréed (don't fill the blender more than halfway, as hot liquid will blow the top off when you start the blender!). Pour all the purée back into the pan and let simmer for a few minutes to thicken slightly. (Alternately, use an immersion blender and purée the soup right in the pot.)

Strain to remove any large bits of fennel seed and season to taste with salt and white pepper.

Garnish with fennel fronds.

Note: To serve cold as vichyssoise, stir a tablespoon of heavy cream into each cupful (cream also helps correct the mixture if you overdo it with the white pepper!).

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