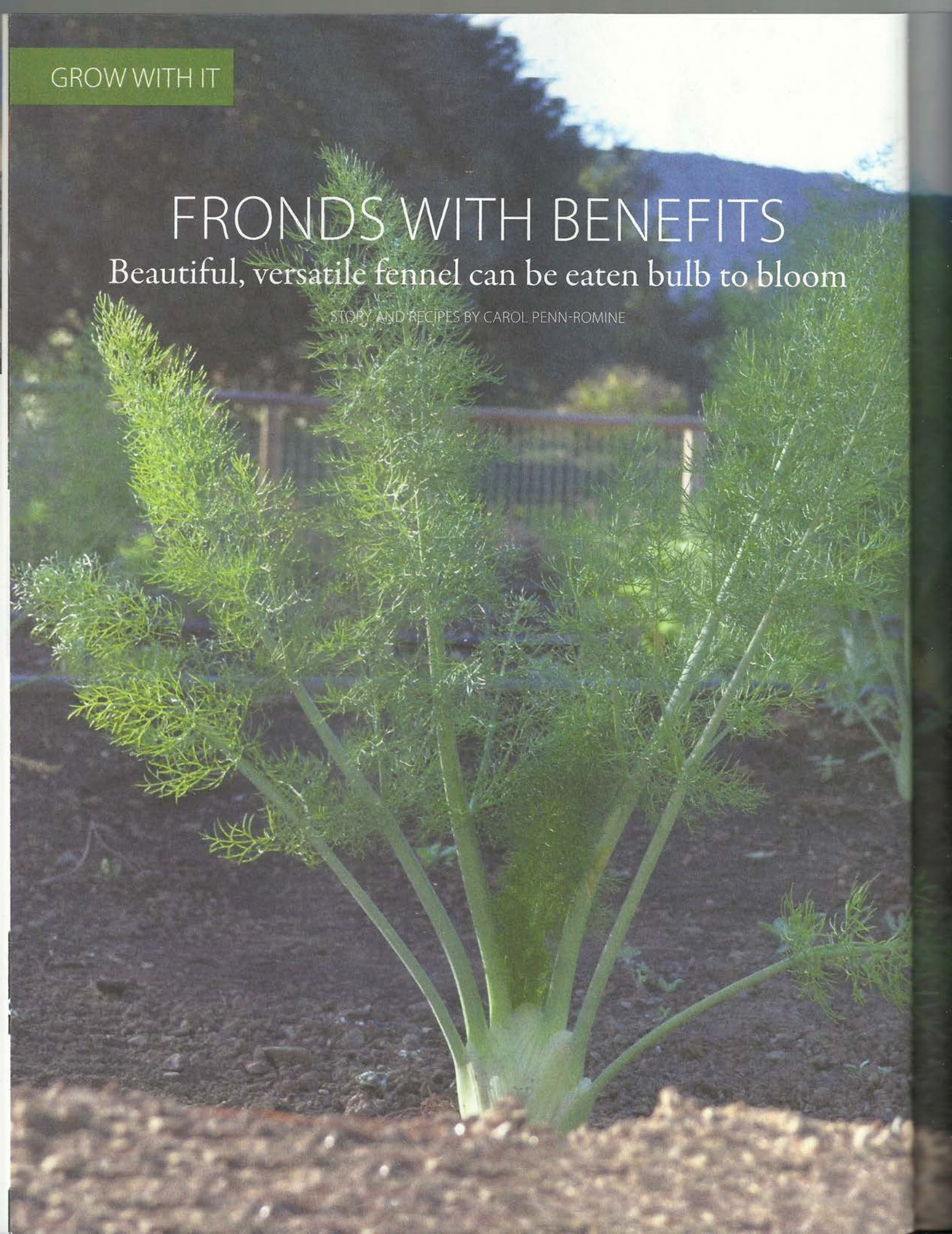


GROW WITH IT

FRONDS WITH BENEFITS

Beautiful, versatile fennel can be eaten bulb to bloom

STORY AND RECIPES BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE





JULIE GERARD'S TIPS FOR HAPPY FENNEL PLANTS

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

So I let the fennel be. And cook with it—and cultivated fennel—whenever I can.

One of the things most appealing about fennel is that it's so easy to use. 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.

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 another layer of richness.

A member of the parsley family, fennel is sometimes mislabeled at the grocery, so if you see this plant with "anise" posted above it, go ahead and buy some. 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 without giving you gruesome Halloween teeth in the process.

If you want to try your hand at growing your own, Ojai gardener and fennel aficionada Julie Gerard recommends using the best seed possible from the area. (See her Tips at right.)

"I use only heirloom seeds, and I try to buy as local as I can," she says. "Local seeds have a better chance of survival because they have been grown in similar conditions to those in my area."

A perfect fit in our Southern California clime, fennel is generous but low maintenance, and because it's perennial, it doesn't need replanting each year. As an added bonus, a fennel plant offers up a variety of ingredients, all of them useful and tasty.

If you want to try your hand at using wild fennel, be sure not to pick too close to the roadsides, or you may find an added ingredient—black road smut. It's best to do your harvesting a little farther afield, with the permission of the person whose land you're harvesting from. Use wild fennel just like you would cultivated fennel. The

Fennel in the early morning light in Julie Gerard's garden in Ojai.

- Select a sunny, well-draining location to plant.
- Work some compost into the soil before planting to give your fennel optimal nutrition.
- Get the seed into the ground after the last frost, but before it gets hot.
- Be spare with the watering to discourage rot and mildew.
- As the young fennel grows, thin out the seedlings, leaving about four to six inches between plants.
- Pull all the weeds around the fennel so it isn't competing for space, nutrition and water.

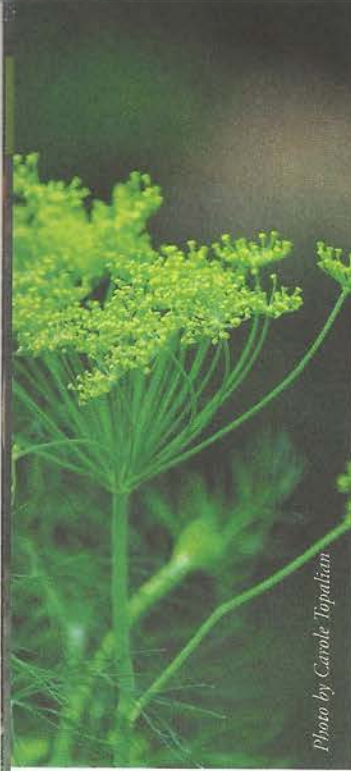


Photo by Carole Topalian



Photo by Carol Penn-Romine

Fennel in bloom (above). Gardeners can capture the fennel pollen with the help of a paper bag and some clothespins, as above. Below: Fennel is so much more than the bulb. The seeds, fronds and pollen can lend intriguing flavors to a dish.



Dried Fennel Seeds

Fennel Fronds

Green Fennel Seeds

Fennel Pollen

Photo by Carol Penn-Romine

big difference between the two is that wild fennel doesn't have the lovely fat bulb at its base. No matter. There's still plenty of plant to work with.

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." Because fennel wows with its possibilities.

DRIED SEEDS

Fennel seed shows up in both sweet and savory recipes of cuisines around the world. You'll find it in everything from German sauerkraut to India's garam masala. It's a part of Chinese five-spice and a key player in making an array of aperitifs and digestifs.

Have you ever noticed a dish of tiny candy-coated something next to the cash register in Indian restaurants? They have fennel seeds inside, which both freshen the breath and aid digestion. Give your Italian red 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.

FRESH GREEN SEEDS

Technically, green fennel seed is classified as a fruit, but let's not split hairs, OK? When you bite into these tiny green pods, you get a fresh burst of fennel flavor. They emerge between the pollen stage and the dry stage. Sprinkle a handful into your pasta sauce at service or stir some into your salad dressing.

STALKS

While fennel's celery-like stalks can be too tough to eat on their own, 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 duck, pork, oily fish and chicken (see recipe on page 22). Split older, woodier stalks lengthwise to use for a roasting bed. They're inedible but still lend good flavor. Or use newer, thinner stalks and after the roasting purée them, along with the pan juices, and mix them into mashed potatoes to serve on the side. Or for a more rustic take, roughly chop instead and serve them as a side.

FRONDS

Feathery fennel fronds make a pretty garnish for soups and salads. Lay some into a roasted vegetable sandwich as a bright, fresh contrast to the richness of the roasting. If you have a huge surplus of frondery, try making pesto with it. And pick a few extra bits of fennel greenery—along with its blossoms—to tuck into a vase with fresh flowers.

FENNEL SALT

Private Chef Robin Goldstein introduces French Grey Sea Salt & Organic Fennel Pollen blend as part of her brand-new A Taste of Ojai Culinary Sea Salts line of blends. The salt also has ground, roasted fennel seeds. Goldstein suggests sprinkling it over roasted potatoes, vegetables, lamb and frittatas. It also brings out the flavors of a shaved fennel, orange and walnut salad, she says. *To learn more, visit ATasteOfOjai.com.*

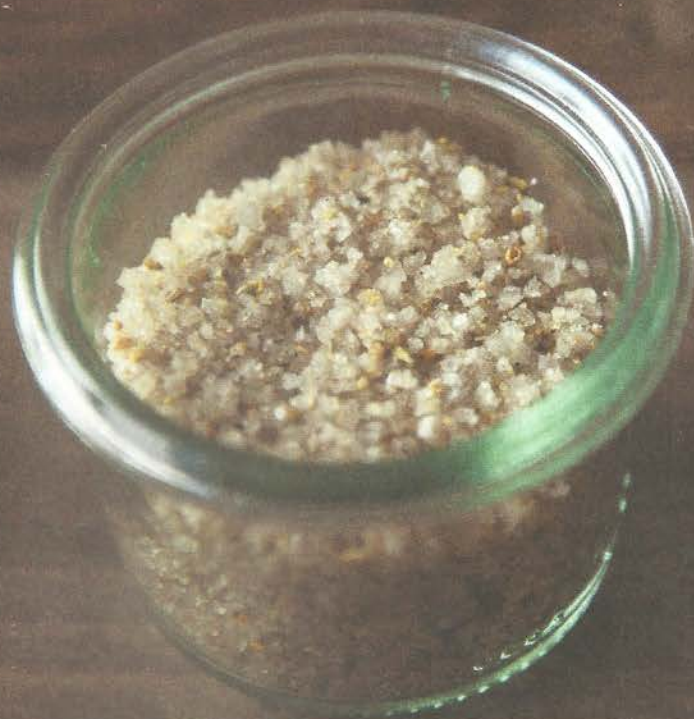



Photo by Karen Nedev

POLLEN

If licorice wore a tiara, it would taste like fennel pollen. Sounds goofy, but words fail in trying to describe the flavor of this golden wonder. There's a quality to it that's not exactly 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 where you've cooked the bulb or seed.

To harvest the pollen, snip the flower stems and clip them upside down inside a paper grocery sack. Let stand undisturbed until the flowers and pollen dry out and drop into the bag. Stored in an airtight container in a cool, dark place, the pollen will keep for about six months. 🌱



BAKED FENNEL-Y CHICKEN THIGHS

Yield: 4 servings

4 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs

1 tablespoon olive oil, plus more for drizzling

Juice and zest of 1 lemon

Kosher salt, to taste

Black pepper, to taste

Fennel stalks, enough to cover a 9- by 9-inch baking dish and fronds to cover chicken

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup dry vermouth

Preheat oven to 425°.

Split fennel stalks lengthwise with a knife and arrange cut side up to cover the bottom of a 9- by 9-inch baking dish in a single layer.

Heat a medium skillet over medium-high heat, add a tablespoon of olive oil and let it heat just to the smoking point. Add chicken, skin side down, and let brown, cooking until it releases from the skillet. Turn and brown the other side.

Lay thighs skin side up on the fennel stalks.

Pour off fat from the browning skillet and, off heat, deglaze skillet with dry vermouth, scraping up any brown bits from the bottom of the skillet. Pour these pan juices over the chicken. Drizzle chicken with a little more olive oil and sprinkle with lemon juice and zest, salt and pepper.

Lay fronds over chicken; then cover dish with foil. Place in preheated oven and bake for 30 minutes, or until the juices run clear and the meat is loose on the bone. Discard fennel fronds and stalks*.

Place the chicken on a serving platter. Pour the cooking juices out of the baking dish, and spoon them over the chicken before serving. Garnish the dish with extra fennel fronds.

*Unless you use only the smallest, most tender stalks, you really can't eat them. You can purée the small, tender stalks and mix them in with mashed potatoes to go with chicken.

Bulb slices make a good base for the chicken dish, and they're really tasty after the roasting is done since they've taken a slow bath in the meat drippings. You can serve them as a side or, as with the tender stalks, purée them and stir into a bowl of mashed potatoes. Personally, I'd just give the bulb slices a rough chop, though. If you use thick, tough stalks for the roast base, discard after using.

Photo by Naomi Henry

FENNEL-Y POTATOES

Yield 8 servings

- 1/4 cup walnuts, roughly chopped
- 4 ounces fennel fronds, thickest stems removed, rinsed and drained well
- 2 ounces spinach, stemmed, washed thoroughly to remove all grit and drained well
- 1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 small garlic clove, roughly chopped
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1/2 cup plain Greek yogurt
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 pounds new potatoes or fingerlings
- 2 tablespoons kalamata olives, drained well and roughly chopped

Preheat oven to 350°. Spread walnuts in a single layer on a baking sheet and toast until aromatic and golden, about 5 minutes. Let cool.

Combine nuts, fennel fronds, spinach, cheese, olive oil, garlic and lemon juice in food processor and purée. (You might need to do this in a couple batches, depending on the size of the food processor bowl.) Add a touch more olive oil if needed to achieve a smooth consistency.

Stir in yogurt and season to taste with kosher salt and black pepper. Thin out with a bit of water if needed to achieve a good pouring consistency.

Boil potatoes in a pot of well-salted water until a knife inserted into the fattest potato meets no resistance. Pour into a colander and drain well. Place potatoes in serving dish and pour the fennel yogurt sauce over them. Garnish with kalamata olives.

IDEAS

If you have surplus fennel from the recipes, you can use it in stock—just keep in mind that fennel has a strong flavor that can overpower a stock. I'd clean it, dice it and freeze it in 1-cup or 2-cup portions. Then when you're ready to make a red sauce, you're good to go, regardless of season.

A salad of thinly shaved slices of fennel bulb and red onion is good tossed with a light champagne vinaigrette. You can add orange slices, too, maybe with some rinsed, sliced black olives and crumbled goat cheese. Again, champagne vinaigrette works well.

—Carol Penn-Romine

Ojai CHAUTAUQUA

April 12 - Immigration: American Dream or American Nightmare?

June 7 - Income Inequality: The End of the Middle Class?

The Ojai Chautauqua is pleased to kick off its 2015 season with two panels in the first half - *Immigration: American Dream or American Nightmare?* and *Income Inequality: The End of the Middle Class?* As with last year's events on GMOs, Water, and Fracking, these panels will feature experienced participants, representing all sides of these complicated issues. Visit our website for information and to purchase tickets. We look forward to seeing you.

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