



Fennel: Shoots, Seeds ... and Memories

In the foothills of California where I grew up, wild fennel is widespread.

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Photo by Rick Gush

Fennel: not just an herb. Fennel's fat lower stems can be added to salads and munched much like celery. In the foothills of California where I grew up, wild fennel is widespread.

When I was a kid I often ate a bit of the green shoots during my wanderings in the woods. It was just like having a piece of licorice, albeit in leafy form. I could also eat some of the crunchy seed heads, either green or dry, and the seeds also had a pleasant licorice taste.

So, fast-forward forty years, and I just harvested a few cultivated fennel from my garden in Italy this week.

I never ate fennel as a vegetable when I lived in the states, and thought it was just an herb or seasoning plant. Here in Italy, big swollen fennel shoots are always for sale in the markets.

Because fennel harvesting season is late winter and early spring, it serves as a commonly steamed vegetable in the Italian diet when zucchini are not in season.

My wife and I eat the swollen lower stems raw in salads, and as a celery stick substitute in snack plates, but mostly we eat fennel steamed with carrots. Delicious with a bit of balsamic vinegar.

In the fall I can harvest fennel seed heads and my wife makes a tea with the seeds.

Fennel seeds are similar to caraway seeds, both being licorice-tasting. My wife also buys a bread with fennel seeds baked in, sort of like rye bread with caraway seeds, and a cheese with fennel seeds, which is not unlike Monterrey Jack cheese with caraway.

These days I let a few plants in the garden go to flower and the big heads are quite decorative.

Fennel is a member of the Umbelliferae family, all plants that have flower clusters that look sort of like umbrellas. Carrots are also among the Umbelliferae, and the flowers of these plants have a reputation for attracting butterflies and other beneficial insects to a garden.

Today I also have a few wild fennel growing on the edges of my garden, but they don't produce the big swollen stems that cultivated varieties do. Nonetheless I let them stay, because every once in a while I enjoy eating the green leafy shoots while I'm working in the garden.

Tastes good and brings back a pleasant memory from my younger days.

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