

June 15 ~ “Vegetable of the Week”

Foeniculum vulgare by Misty Goldman

Common Name(s): Bronze Fennel, Fennel, Finocchio, Florence Fennel

Genus: *Foeniculum* **Species:** *Vulgare*

Family: Apiaceae

Life Cycle: Perennial

There are two types of fennel. One is treated as an herb (herb fennel – *Foeniculum vulgare*) and one that is treated like a bulb type vegetable (Florence fennel or Finocchio – *Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*). The herb type grows 3-5 feet tall with fine textured foliage resembling dill. Flat topped clusters of yellow flowers appear in late summer. Stems, leaves and seeds of this type of fennel are harvested and used. Florence fennel is shorter with darker green foliage and is grown for its large, flat thick rosette of petioles at the base often referred to as a “bulb.” Both forms have an anise or licorice flavor.



Grow fennel as a border, in vegetable gardens, herb gardens, cottage gardens or meadows. Good plant for a butterfly garden. Seeds are commonly used as flavoring in a variety of foods such as bakery products or sausages.

Herb fennel can be harvested as needed by cutting away the feathery foliage. If seed is desired, allow the plant to flower and when the flower heads turn brown the plant can be cut, placed in a paper bag, and hung in a cool, well-ventilated area to dry. Seeds will drop down into the bag and can then be cleaned and stored. Foliage can also be air dried and stored for later use. Florence fennel can be harvested when the “bulbs” are about the size of tennis balls by digging the “bulb” and cutting off the root and cutting back the top. “Bulbs” can then be stored in a cool location for several weeks.

Though I am not a fan of licorice, I do enjoy the taste of fennel, which is described as sweet with a mildly anise, licorice flavor. The fennel fronds can be chopped up for use in a variety of salads, egg dishes and with fish. My favorite way to use it is to braise the actual fennel bulb itself. Just slice it like you would an onion, nestle it in a shallow dish in a mixture of heavy cream, butter and chicken or vegetable broth to just cover the slices. Sprinkle with salt & pepper and cook covered at 375° for 45 minutes. Towards the end of the cook time, sprinkle a little parmesan cheese on top and continue to cook uncovered. This will form a delicious crust. Allow to sit for about 10 minutes and enjoy. It’s a tasty treat with a baguette loaf to soak up all the delicious sauce!



Noteworthy Characteristics

Flowers are very attractive to butterflies. Fennel is a larval plant for certain swallowtail butterflies.

Genus name comes from the Latin name for this traditional salad and potherb which, in Italian, is called finocchio.

Problems and diseases

No serious insect or disease problems. Stem and root rot may occur, especially in poorly drained soils. Watch for aphids and slugs. Larvae (caterpillars) of swallowtail butterflies may chew on the foliage.

References:

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/foeniculum-vulgare/>

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org>

<https://web.extension.illinois.edu/herbs/fennel.cfm>

Photos courtesy of <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org>

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