



Home-grown "Fast Food" for Busy Families by Sara L. Ambarian

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It doesn't take a lot of research to find out that sprouts are an impressive nutritional addition to our diet. In "The Healing Foods" (Dell Publishing, 1989), Patricia Hausman and Judith Benn Hurley call alfalfa sprouts a "Three-Star Superfood". In the family preparedness book, "Making the Best of Basics" (Gold Leaf Press, 1997), James Talmage Stevens relates a story about a family who added sprouted grain to the diet of chicks they were raising and ended up using "25% less food" and raising chicks that "were much bigger, heartier and had less fat" than with unsprouted grain. Stevens also lauds the benefits of sprouts both as easy to prepare and easy to store.

For more specific nutritional information, take a look at this page from the International Sprout Grower's Association for starters:

<http://www.isga-sprouts.org/nutritio.htm> and this site from International Specialty Supply, a commercial sprouting supplier:

http://www.sproutnet.com/Press/sprouts_for_optimum_nutrition.htm

Certainly these websites have reason to sing the praises of the product that provides their livelihood, but they're not the only ones. Consider this fine article by organic gardening expert, Jeanne Prevett Sable, which really captures the fun, as well as the nutritional and practical advantages, of home sprouting:

<http://www.theheartofnewengland.com/garden/sprouts.html>

Home-grown edible sprouts are a first-class "fit" for many modern families, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps you can relate to some of mine. As a wife and mother, I'm always interested in providing a wholesome and nurturing home atmosphere. As a consumer, I'm concerned about the quality, freshness and safety of the food with which I nourish myself and my family. As a member of a busy family, I'm always looking for easy ways to enhance our lives without complicating them. As a resident of a cold-weather region, I'm excited about the idea of growing something fresh to eat when it's snowing outside.

I had grown edible sprouts off-and-on years ago, but fallen out of the habit. When recently I was reminded of the practice by a book I was reading, it seemed a natural for our family at this time in our lives. So I brushed up on the techniques, ordered some fresh seeds for sprouting, and started experimenting again. A few months of sprouting later, I am more enthusiastic about home-grown sprouts than I ever was before. We have found the growing process very easy to incorporate into our schedule, the array of sproutable seed varieties exciting, and the length of time the sprouts keep fresh in the refrigerator impressive (especially if you've ever had the experience of buying a box of alfalfa sprouts in the market and having them sour almost immediately, or heard the recent news about salmonella contamination of commercial sprouts.) What I've also found, however, is that living things attract attention. It's irresistible! Every time I rinse our sprouts, they've changed since the last time, and often I notice some family member peeking over my shoulder to see how they're coming along. Frankly, I'm always curious to see how they're coming myself! Since we grow a few different varieties at different times and for different culinary uses, I also am often asked when I soak a new batch of seeds, "So what do you have in there?"

When finished, the sprouts are visually interesting. Grain sprouts are "finished" at a much smaller size than alfalfa or red clover sprouts. Radish and broccoli sprouts end up with leaves showing, like alfalfa and red clover, but are thicker, greener, less "stringy", and much bolder in flavor. I've not personally grown

bean sprouts, but most of us know from eating them in various cuisines how big and succulent they are. We usually have at least two types of sprouts finished in the refrigerator at any time, and I love the way they dress up a salad, sandwich, taco, etc., with their fresh colors and interesting textures when used together. Besides, for those of you who have ever grown your own food, isn't it interesting how much more likely even the most resistant family member sometimes is to at least "try" some home-grown product? I think it's special because "we grew it", and also because this is the "finished product" of the project of growing something. If you watched it being grown or helped it grow, you're often more curious about it than if you had no personal experience with it.

I think that is one major reason why food gardening projects in general, and especially edible sprouts, teach such interesting lessons to children (and others of us who haven't had experiences of this kind). For many of us, we live far from farms and orchards, and although we all know intellectually "where food comes from", and can educate our kids about those facts, opportunities to see our food grow are few and far between. Growing your own sprouts not only allows you to grow your own food with limited space, money, and time investment, it allows you to actually watch them grow! What a neat experience for all of us, young and old!

All you really need for a simple sprout-growing experiment is:

- ~ a small quantity of seed that is grown and packaged for SPECIFICALLY sprouting (so it's free of pesticides and other potential toxins which are added to garden seeds to help them grow and be healthy)
- ~ a clean glass jar (about quart-sized is usually good)
- ~ some cheesecloth (probably available at your local grocery store, just ask)
- ~ a sturdy rubber band
- ~ a good source of cold, clean water
- ~ and about 3-7 days, depending on the sprout variety you are growing

There are other methods (including paper towel sprouting), and other equipment (including specially-designed sprouters), which you can try, if you like; but this is a good starter method, in my opinion. If after your first experiments, you and your family are interested in growing more sprouts (or if you know you love sprouts already), you can research and invest in more sophisticated supplies. However, for a one-time experiment, or if you just aren't sure if sprouting will fit into your lifestyle, there probably is no reason to necessarily make a bigger investment than this.

When you buy sprouting seeds, they will come with instructions specific to the type of seed they are, and you should read those carefully. Generally, however, most seeds are sprouted with variations on a couple of basically three steps: soaking, rinsing, draining, and leaving them alone so they can grow. Most seeds soak for about 8 hours, though some need to soak quite a bit less. You can soak the seeds in the jar you will use to grow them.

After soaking, you need to drain your seeds and then rinse them a few times in cold water. Cover the jar opening with one or two layers of cheesecloth (depending on how small your seeds are-- use as few layers as practical to allow as much air/water flow as possible) and secure it with a rubber band before rinsing. The cheesecloth makes it easy to add, shake, and empty the rinse water without losing any seeds. Be sure to empty as much of the water out as possible! Turn the jar upside down, shake, wait a minute or two, and shake again, repeating until you feel you have them fully-drained. Excess moisture can cause serious problems with your sprouting. The seeds get all the moisture they need through rinsing. Also, knock any seeds off of the cheesecloth and try to separate the seeds a bit within the jar by shaking. You will rinse your seeds, typically, about every 8 hours. In between, just set the jars aside, somewhere where there is good air movement, but not intense air flow or direct sun that could dry out your sprouts between rinses. Some people cover their jars with a towel to replicate the darkness underground; other people don't. We've grown them both ways and had good results both ways. Continue the rinse, drain and wait cycle consistently... and watch what happens! Your seed package/provider should give you an idea of how many days the particular sprouts you're growing should take to mature. Your time might vary a bit due to freshness of the seed, temperatures in your home, and other factors. However, the predicted sprouting time will give you a good guide so you can plan when you want to do your sprouting.

Because most sprouts take between 3 and 10 days from soak to finished sprout, each "crop" of sprouts requires a fairly short time commitment; and it offers a pretty fast "gratification". If you find that you won't have time to wait for your sprouts to fully mature, due to travel or other responsibilities that keep you from maintaining your sprouts, taste-test them as they are. You might like them even though they're not fully sprouted, and they need not be wasted. If you do like them, you can rinse them one more time, drain them completely, and store them in a bowl in the fridge covered with plastic wrap or some other airtight container.

Once your sprouts are the size you want, many of them are then (if not before) exposed to light to allow them to get green (adding chlorophyll to the impressive list of nutrients they provide.) You may be able to do this with ambient light, or you might want/need to put them in a window which receives indirect light from outdoors.

As mentioned earlier, you want to avoid direct hot sun. However, we've done well greening sprouts in a window even on snowy or rainy days, so it doesn't take much light to do the trick. When they are done to your satisfaction, rinse and drain them (removing the leftover seed hulls, if you like), and store them in the refrigerator as described above. Once you learn to plan the amounts and timing of your batches of sprouts, you'll probably nearly always eat your sprouts before they are past their prime. Besides the normal uses in sandwiches and salads, sprouts make wonderful snacks and can also be added to a variety of other dishes, including Mexican food, omelettes, baked goods, and more. If you don't eat them all right away, you can expect them to last well in the refrigerator for about a week.

As you can see, the process is very simple. After several months of sprouting, including seven different varieties of sprouts, we have had only one crop failure. It happened after we'd been successfully sprouting for some time, and it seemed to be caused by a combination of issues, including a change in temperature and humidity in our home, slightly warmer than usual rinse water, and a decrease in air circulation. We also sprouted one variety of seeds which we did not particularly like, but I have given those to a family member to try so that they will not go to waste.

I hope that some of you will try sprouting with your families, and that if you do, you will enjoy it as much as we have.

For more more specific information on sprouting supplies, techniques, recipes, frequently asked questions, and fun facts and ideas for kids, I highly recommend you visit the Sproutpeople website at: <http://www.sproutpeople.com> It provides both for the most complete and accessible information I've seen anywhere and an amazing variety of products. I, and others in my family, have done business with them on multiple occasions and always been pleased by both their fine quality products and fast efficient, and friendly service.

About Sara L. Ambarian

Sara L. Ambarian is a wife, homeschooling mother, custom wedding gown and accessory designer, author and illustrator. She is one multi-talented lady. **Visit**

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