

Substitutes for Curry Leaves

Curry leaves are an almost mandatory part of many Asian and Thai dishes, providing a taste that is synonymous with their cuisine and the flavors they bring to the table. But if you don't have curry leaves on hand, or for some reason you don't like a certain aspect of them, there are many viable substitutes out there that can provide the same level of flair and flavor.

In fact, curry leaves can be somewhat difficult to find in certain countries, meaning that having a viable substitute to use is even more important, just in case you run out and can't find more. If you're looking for a way to replace curry leaves in your recipes without anyone that eats your dishes being any wiser, or if you just don't have curry leaves available for the dish you plan on making tonight, these substitutes will serve you well in an emergency.

However, before we begin, you should note that you'll never find a perfect replacement for curry leaves. No matter what substitute you use or what combination you find, you'll only ever be able to get close to the flavor of a curry leaf. It's important to keep this in mind, rather than convincing yourself that any other herb will be a perfect copy of what the curry leaf has to offer.

What Are Curry Leaves Exactly?

If you want to know how to substitute something, you need to know enough about it to think of potential replacements that still fill its niche. We certainly won't be able to list every potential substitute for curry leaves in this one article, so the more you know about curry leaves, the more options you'll be able to think of yourself when you are cooking.

To start with, curry leaves are very aromatic and have a strong flavor that has often been likened to citrus and lemongrass. When you cook it, it often has a nutty aroma and a mildly pungent bite. If you're trying to find a nutritional substitute for curry leaves, they are high in fiber, iron, carbs, calcium, and Vitamins A, B, C, and E. They are also powerful antioxidants capable of dealing with free radicals.

Of course, when looking for substitutes, you probably won't be able to find a perfect replacement that is the exact same flavor, and with the exact same health benefits. However, there are plenty of herbs out there that come close to providing the same flavor and effect.

Potential Substitutes

Lime Leaves

Lime leaves are an excellent replacement for curry leaves for many reasons. To start, they too are extremely aromatic, and they carry a great citrus flavor while also serving to bring out the other flavors in a dish. On top of that, lime leaves are also great antioxidants, and they possess a lot of vitamins and useful nutrients.

However, it's worth noting that lime leaves are not exactly like curry leaves and that there are a lot of different types of lime leaves available. Some of them may be better at reproducing the taste and fragrance of curry leaves than others.

You should also keep in mind that lime leaves are not intended to be eaten whole. You can use them whole when cooking for adding flavor, but if you want to consume them, you should slice them into thin slivers or crush them with a mortar and pestle. Regardless of how they are used, adding lime leaves to your dishes in place of curry leaves will go a long way to adding the citrusy, floral taste and aroma that you are attempting to substitute.

Lime Zest

Surprisingly, one of the potential substitutes for curry leaves is not an herb at all, but rather lime zest; the top layer of a lime rind is imbued with incredible citrus flavor and aroma, which is perfect for getting a similar effect to the one that curry leaves provide. In fact, lime zest is one of the most often recommended replacements for curry leaves because of their powerful citrusy taste.

However, lime zest can't hit all of the notes that a curry leaf can provide, so it is even better for you to combine lime zest with another substitute, such as the aforementioned lime leaves or perhaps bay leaves. By combining the two, you'll get a lot closer to hitting all of the notes that curry leaves often provide.

Furthermore, lime zest is just an excellent addition to nearly any of the dishes you would normally be putting curry leaves in. Granted, lime zest in and of itself isn't a great source of the many nutrients curry leaves offer, but chances are you are more interested in replicating the taste of curry leaves, rather than their nutritional value.

Lemon Balm

There are many members of the mint family that make serviceable substitutes for curry leaves, and lemon balm is one such member, with an aroma that is very similar to the curry leaf. Keep in mind that you can't use the root of the balm; only the leaves are usable in your recipes as a replacement for curry leaves.

Lemon balm is a bit stronger than curry leaves, so you should use a proportionally smaller amount of them when using them as a substitute. A ratio of 3 to 2 is ideal. For instance, if the recipe calls for nine curry leaves, you should only use six lemon balm leaves.

While providing the same citrus aroma and somewhat similar flavor to the curry leaf, lemon balm also has a lot of health benefits. Lemon balm is well-known for being an extremely calming ingredient, and it is

very good at lowering the severity of stomach issues, calming down things like upset stomachs and bloating. Used properly, lemon balm can be an excellent replacement for curry leaves, hitting a fair amount of the same flavors and undertones.

Bay Leaves

Bay leaves are well known for the sweet undertones they inject into dishes, which makes them a very good candidate as a substitute for curry leaves. It isn't perfect and it certainly won't give the exact same feel to a dish as curry leaves, but bay leaves are very good at balancing the many flavors and tones of a dish. In fact, they're well known for bringing out other flavors in a dish more than being tasty themselves.

Curry leaves are a bit sweeter and milder, but bay leaves are slightly bitter and earthy. This is why bay leaves won't get you the exact same taste and aroma as curry leaves, but as a substitute, they will still be serviceable as a replacement.

Basil Leaves

At this point, we're getting to the potential replacements that aren't necessarily the absolute best option but are still viable in a serious pinch. Basil leaves don't hit all of the same notes as curry leaves, but they do still lend a very floral aroma to a dish, allowing them to fill at least one of the roles of curry leaves when used.

It would definitely be better to use an herb with a more citrus kick to it, like the aforementioned lime leaves, but if you really have nothing else available in your kitchen and you don't have time to go to the store, basil leaves can serve as an emergency stand-in for curry leaves if nothing else. However, if you were to combine lemon juice with those basil leaves, you might get a bit closer to that curry leaf taste you are trying to emulate.

Daun Salam Leaves

These leaves are a little odd in the sense that they taste a bit like cinnamon, but a bit milder. Once again, these leaves aren't the ideal substitute for curry leaves, but at this point, it should be clear that the only thing that will really give you the taste of a curry leaf is a curry leaf. You can get close to its taste, but you won't be able to find a substitute that will provide that flavor and aroma perfectly.

That said, Daun Salam leaves are not a great choice in dishes that are primarily composed of vegetables, but they do work quite well with meat dishes.

What Not to Use

We have mentioned quite a large number of viable substitutes for fresh curry leaves here, but something that should probably be mentioned is what not to use as a substitute. Lots of people think that certain herbs or spices will be a good replacement for fresh curry leaves when they're either totally subpar or

even harmful to the dish rather than beneficial. We'll list a few things people often mistakenly assume are good replacements.

The first, and probably most important thing to know, is that curry powder is not in any way a substitute for curry leaves. Because of the identical word in both of these items, many people assume curry powder can simply stand in for fresh curry leaves, but this is not at all the case. Curry powder is not intended to provide the same flavor as curry leaves, nor is it even used in the same manner. Don't ever add curry powder in place of curry leaves when you are cooking a dish.

The second poor substitute is dried curry leaves, which may come as a surprise to some people: after all, dried curry leaves are literally just curry leaves, so how could they not serve as a suitable replacement for their fresher kin? Well, the unfortunate truth is that curry leaves lose a great deal of their flavor as they dry, and a dried curry leaf will only provide a fraction of the taste and aroma that a fresh one would.

So in actuality, maybe you could use dry curry leaves to stand in for fresh ones, but if you wanted to get the same level of flavor as ten fresh curry leaves, you would need dozens of dry ones, and we shouldn't have to tell you why that much plant matter in a dish probably isn't a great idea.

The Final Verdict

It is worth stating once again simply because it is very important; nothing you can find or use will fully replicate the aroma and taste of fresh curry leaves. You can come close with some herbs, and you can hit some of the same notes if you combine certain ingredients, but a perfect replication of the curry leaf flavor is just not possible.

This isn't to say that any dish that calls for fresh curry leaves will be ruined if you don't have any, but you have to remember that the overall flavor of the dish will change, though not necessarily in a bad way. Using lime zest or bay leaves with lemon juice will obviously taste a bit different than if you cooked with fresh curry leaves, but the citrus flavor and aroma will almost always go very well with any dish that was going to use curry leaves in the first place.

Curry leaves are a unique ingredient, and they can be very difficult to find depending on where you live. If you do live in a region where curry leaves are very rare, consider growing your own in your backyard or a greenhouse. While this would, of course, be more effort than just buying them, it will ultimately save you time and money if you find yourself cooking with curry leaves very often.

While we did discuss all sorts of viable curry leaf replacements here today, the best option would be to never need to replace them at all, so adding curry leaves to the herbs you grow yourself will provide you with a regular supply of this amazing spice and its flavor.