

I'm not anti-recipe (obviously), but some things just don't need them — and most vegetable soups fall into that category. Here are easy-to-follow instructions for making vegetable (vegetarian and, for the most part, vegan) soups with common ingredients, a variety of choices and terrific flavor. Print the following page, stick it on your refrigerator and work your way through it. By the time you're done — 12 days or 12 weeks later — you'll never again need a recipe for vegetable soup. Promise.

And you'll need no special techniques, no advance preparation and, for the most part, not much time. You can use just about any vegetable (or bean) you have on hand. These are not stone soups, but they're close.

I've created four essential categories: creamy (vegetables puréed with dairy); brothy (a strained vegetable stock, with quick-cooking ingredients added); earthy (with beans); and hearty (the vegetables sautéed first, to deepen their flavor).

A few practical notes: All of these recipes serve four, and you'll want about a 2.5-to-4-quart (medium or large) pot. Most can be cooked for a while — but not so long that the freshness is gone. Most will taste as good or better the next day, so consider making a double batch and refrigerating (or freezing) the leftovers. But never boil a soup after you've added dairy to it; instead, reheat gently.

If you want a supersmooth soup (and just about any of these soups can be puréed if you like), use a standing blender — let the soup cool a bit first — which creates a finer purée than an immersion blender does; you might even strain the soup after puréeing it.

Garnishes are all optional, though herbs add a dimension that will be lacking otherwise. If you taste as you're cooking, you'll be fine, because there is really nothing to go wrong here.

1. CREAMY

Creamy Spinach Soup

Put 1 chopped onion, 2 peeled garlic cloves, 3 cups water and salt and pepper in a pot over high heat. Boil, cover, lower the heat and simmer until the onion is tender, about 10 minutes. Add 10 ounces chopped spinach and 1/2 cup parsley leaves; cook until the spinach is tender, 2 to 3 minutes. Add 1 cup Greek-style yogurt and purée. Garnish: A spoonful of Greek-style yogurt and chopped parsley.

Squash-and-Ginger Soup

Substitute 1 tablespoon minced ginger for the garlic and 4 cups chopped butternut squash for the spinach (it will take longer to soften). Skip the parsley and substitute half-and-half or cream for the yogurt. Garnish: A spoonful of cream.

Curried Cauliflower Soup

Substitute 1 tablespoon minced ginger for the garlic, 2 cups cauliflower florets for the spinach (they will take longer to soften), 1 tablespoon curry powder for the parsley and coconut milk for the yogurt. Garnish: Chopped cilantro.

2. BROTHY

Vegetable Broth With Toast

Put 2 chopped carrots, 2 chopped onions, 1 small chopped potato, 2 chopped celery ribs, 2 garlic cloves, 10 sliced mushrooms, 1 cup chopped tomatoes (canned are fine), 10 parsley sprigs, 1/2 ounce dried porcini, 8 cups water and salt and pepper in a pot over high heat. Boil, lower heat and simmer until the vegetables are soft, 30 minutes or longer. Strain and serve over toasted good bread. Garnish: Chopped celery leaves.

Egg Drop Soup

Beat 4 eggs. Boil the strained stock, lower the heat so it simmers and add the eggs in a steady stream, stirring constantly until they're cooked, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in 1/4 cup chopped scallions, 1 tablespoon soy sauce and 1 tablespoon sesame oil. Skip the bread. Garnish: Chopped scallions.

Rice-and-Pea Soup

Boil the strained stock, lower the heat so it simmers and add 3/4 cup white rice. Cook until tender, then add 2 cups fresh or frozen peas; cook for a minute or two. Skip the bread. Garnish: Grated Parmesan.

3. EARTHY

Bean Soup

Put 1 1/2 cup dried beans, 1 chopped onion, 2 chopped carrots, 2 chopped celery ribs, 2 bay leaves, 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves and 6 cups water in a pot over high heat. Boil, lower the heat, cover and simmer until the beans are soft, at least 1 hour, adding more water if necessary. Season with salt and pepper. Garnish: A drizzle of olive oil.

Chickpea-and-Pasta Soup

Substitute chickpeas for the beans and rosemary for the thyme and add 1 cup chopped tomatoes (canned are fine). When the chickpeas are almost tender, add 1/2 cup small pasta. Cook until the pasta and chickpeas are tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Garnish: A few chopped rosemary leaves.

Spicy Black-Bean Soup

Use black beans and substitute fresh oregano for the thyme. When the beans are done, add 1 tablespoon chili powder, 1 dried or canned chipotle and the juice of a lime. Garnish: Cilantro and sour cream.

4. HEARTY

Minestrone

Sauté 1 chopped onion, 1 chopped carrot, 1 chopped celery rib and 1 teaspoon minced garlic in 3 tablespoons olive oil for 5 minutes. Add 2 cups cubed potatoes and salt and pepper; cook for 2 minutes. Add 1 cup chopped tomatoes (canned are fine) and 5 cups water. Boil, lower the heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Add 1 cup chopped green beans; simmer for 20 minutes. Garnish: Chopped parsley and grated Parmesan.

Mushroom Soup

Substitute 1 1/2 pounds sliced mushrooms (preferably an assortment) for the potatoes; sauté until they brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Substitute 1/2 cup white wine for the tomatoes, skip the green beans and add a fresh thyme sprig with the water. Garnish: A few thyme leaves.

Tomato-and-Garlic Soup

Use 2 tablespoons minced garlic and substitute 2 tablespoons tomato paste for the celery. Skip the potatoes and green beans; use 3 cups tomatoes and 3 cups water. Cook the tomatoes for 10 to 15 minutes. Garnish: Lots of chopped or torn basil.