

Make water festive for holiday gatherings

More people are health conscious these days and may be focusing on beverages that are calorie free. Clean, fresh water is among the healthiest beverages out there. It's calorie and sugar free and when you get it from the tap, it is about as inexpensive as you can get. The Harvard School of Public Health states that "water is the best choice" for quenching your thirst and rehydrating your body. Your body also water in every one of its biochemical reactions as well as metabolism, breathing, sweating and removal of waste.

Choosing water or other calorie-free or low-calorie beverages has benefits all year around. Replacing two 20 ounce sugary soft drinks a week with a calorie and sugar-free option can save nearly 25,000 calories or more than 1,700 teaspoons of added sugar over the course of a year. So, your guests will likely thank you for serving water in some way.

You can also consider providing other healthful options in addition to tap water, such as sugar-free sparkling flavored waters, nonalcoholic beers and sparkling ciders at the wet bar. Another idea: Make a simple nonalcoholic punch from a variety of juices, iced tea and club soda and keep it cool with an ice ring made of water and pureed fruit.

You can also just add some zip to water from your kitchen tap to dress up for a holiday party by trying some of these ideas.

- Slice cucumbers and add them to the pitcher along with sprigs of slightly crushed fresh peppermint. The result is a cool, refreshing, thirst-quenching drink.
- Add raspberries, blueberries and blackberries. Allow them to be slightly crushed as you stir them in with ice. You may want to have a cocktail strainer on hand to allow guests to choose whether the berries flow into the glass or not. Either way the water will have a subtle sweetness.
- Opt for a citrus or melon theme. Slice lemons, limes and oranges or cut chunks of cantaloupe, honeydew and watermelon and let them float in the pitcher.
- Think ahead and freeze fruits into ice cubes that you add to the pitcher, so the water contains even more fruit as the ice melts.

In addition, put some thought into the container itself. A nice clear glass pitcher can be pretty for serving water. Also consider other options as well, including a wine carafe or a large beverage dispenser with a spigot.

No matter what you add to water for your party guests, keep food safety in mind. Thoroughly rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under cool running water before adding them to the container. For citrus fruits or vegetables with a rind, such as oranges and cucumbers, scrub them with a vegetable brush as you rinse.

Source: Ohio State University Extension, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension