



Legendary Snacks

Legend has it that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree in his youth. Was he testing the sharpness of his new hatchet or had he simply found a quick way to reach all those luscious, red-ripe fruits? To tell the truth, we think it's the latter. Whether the story is fact or fiction, Washington and this stone fruit are inexorably connected. There's even an annual festival in the nation's capitol that celebrates the cherry tree. Over a million people each year visit Washington, DC to walk tree-lined streets, admire the blossoms, and participate in cherry-themed activities that mark the coming of spring.

Certainly, cherries can be enjoyed year round, especially in their dried form. Cherries are a wonderfully complex fruit. The sweet yet tart flavor of a cherry makes eating them irresistible. And cherries have long been touted for their health properties, including a growing body of research by leading universities and health institutions. Cherries – whether dried, fresh, juiced, or frozen – contain a number of antioxidants including anthocyanins and melatonin in addition to other important nutrients like beta carotene, vitamins C & E, vitamins C and E, potassium, magnesium, iron, fiber and folate.

Pairing sweet, tart dried cherries with popcorn is a smart choice for today's discerning snacker. Popcorn is a whole grain, which makes it a good-for-you food. As a whole grain, popcorn provides carbohydrates and fiber to the diet and is naturally low in fat and calories. Consuming at least 3 or more ounce equivalents of whole grains per day can reduce the risk of several chronic diseases and may help with weight maintenance. That's good news for your waistline. By combining popcorn and cherries you are adding needed nutrients to your body in a most satisfying and appetizing way.

If you're looking for a delicious and wholesome snack to serve this July 4th, why not offer one that honors the Father of our Country and one of America's oldest and most beloved snack foods? This recipe for Apricot-Cherry Popcorn Squares is perfect for summertime or anytime you want a special treat.

Apricot-Cherry Popcorn Squares

10 cups air-popped popcorn
 ¾ cup dried cherries
 ¾ cup sugar
 ½ cup + 2 tbsp. water
 ½ cup sugar-free apricot preserves
 ¼ cup light corn syrup
 ½ tsp. lemon juice

Combine popcorn and cherries in large bowl. Combine sugar, water, preserves, corn syrup, and lemon juice in a small saucepan; bring to a boil and cook, stirring constantly, until sugar dissolve. Cook until mixture forms thick, "ropy" threads that drip from the spoon. Pour slowly over popped popcorn and mix thoroughly. Spray 9 x 13-inch baking dish with cooking spray. Press mixture into baking dish and cool completely before serving.

Serves: 12

