



Extension News Column

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Re: Pinching Pennies column for Feb. 7, 2011

Valentine's Day is around the corner. Like many other holidays, the costs of celebrating Valentine's Day can put a crimp in our budgets. But if your New Year's resolution had anything to do with healthy eating or losing weight, all those calorie-laden, heart-shaped boxes can cost you in a different way, with extra pounds.

Before Valentine's Day turns into just one more sugary feast, it's a good idea to come up with some Valentine's Day treats that are healthy, delicious and less expensive.

Start the day with heart-shaped pancakes, or cut bread slices into hearts, dip in egg batter and fry for French toast. Cut the lunchtime sandwiches into hearts with a cookie cutter. At the end of the day, some pizza places will be offering heart-shaped pizzas. Make your own at about a quarter the cost. If you are not an accomplished bread maker, buy frozen dough and shape into hearts.

Keep sugar content to a minimum and eliminate empty calories in creating your healthy valentine treats. That might mean including such items as fruits, whole grains and low-fat dairy products. And you might keep in mind that for kids, appearance is everything when it comes to food. They won't try what doesn't appeal to them.

Dark chocolate, rich in antioxidants, can form the basis of several valentine treats. Chocolate-dipped strawberries are a favorite. Though strawberries are not inexpensive at this time of year, think how much that box of candy cost.

Or, try one of our favorite fruits, apples. Small apples, or for easier eating, apple wedges, can be dipped in melted chocolate and then decorated with one or two tiny cinnamon candy hearts.

The heart shape is key to festive treats. Heart-shaped sugar cookies are a staple, but think of ways to use that heart-shaped cookie cutter in different ways. Make brownies or marshmallow cereal treats and cut into hearts. Besides, the scraps are a great treat for you to snack on as you are working. Homemade granola bars, with

dried cranberries added for color, can be shaped like hearts by hand, or cut with the cookie cutter after they are finished.

If you feel you must have chocolate candy hearts, make a pan of fudge and cut it into hearts after it is set. Or, buy a heart-shaped candy mold and fill with dipping chocolate melts in either white or chocolate versions.

In sharing these treats with your friends and family, remember that presentation is everything. Why else would we spend all that money on heart-shaped boxes? Wrap each heart cookie or candy in plastic wrap and present it in a plain white lunch bag that is decorated with a heart-shaped paper doily. Or, arrange them in a small basket with shredded paper.

Cereal mixes are great for Valentine's Day when they are packaged in plastic bags tied with red ribbon bows and decorated with heart stickers. Mix together assorted whole grain cereals, tiny crackers, small pretzels, dried cranberries and some dark chocolate chips.

For special desserts, low-fat strawberry ice cream in pink cones is an easy-to-prepare favorite. Or, make a parfait with layers of low-fat cherry yogurt, cherry pie filling and granola cereal. Strawberry smoothies made with skim milk can taste so rich that your sweeties will never realize they're enjoying a healthy treat.

In the final analysis, it is the thought that counts. Remember to watch your budget and deliver high quality, unique valentine treats to your friends and family.

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