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Clockwise from top left: purple carrots, pomegranate, sea vegetables and umeboshi plums.

The modern food and health industries are awash with a new band of superfoods said to help us attain everything from better skin to protection against cancer. But with more and more produce hitting the shelves each year, each boasting their own health claims, the superfood market can seem a minefield. Make every bite count with this round-up of the 10 superfoods you need to know about. *Bon appétit.*

1. CHIA SEEDS

Delicious on salads or in muffins and smoothies, chia seeds are rich in omega-6 and omega-3 essential fatty acids, which are needed for maintaining optimal heart, skin and immune-system health. Nutritionist and therapeutic chef Samantha Gowing loves them for their ability to heal the digestive system. Annalies Corse, a naturopath, medical scientist and lecturer at the Australian College of Natural Medicine, agrees but with one caveat. "People don't consume enough for it to be of any great benefit, because they only sprinkle it," she warns. "I would say you need one to two cups per week in your diet, long-term, to get the full benefits." Available at organic food stores, www.organicsaustraliaonline.com.au or www.kombuwholefoods.com.

Goodness gracious

With all the hype about superfoods it can be difficult to know which ones to include in your diet. Here's a guide to some of the more popular powerhouse heroes.

WORDS: SARINA LEWIS

2. COCONUT WATER

It may have taken the celebrity world by storm but Gowing is dubious as to the benefits of the range of coconut waters currently flooding the health food market. "It's a case of fresh is best," she explains. "From a real coconut it's fantastic; you're getting the coconut oil, which is very healthy and it's very hydrating. But [the packaging may be] lined with aluminium, so that counterbalances the healthy properties." Corse is similarly reserved. "It's isotonic, which means it has a similar concentration of salts and water to our own blood, which is why people rave about it, but it's not much better than just water," she says, adding that its benefit is really for athletes and those participating in vigorous and regular exercise.

Available at supermarkets, organic food stores, www.organicsaustraliaonline.com.au or www.kombuwholefoods.com.au.

3. AÇAÍ BERRIES

In powder form, açai berries, which are renowned for their antioxidant properties, can be stirred into smoothies or sprinkled over yoghurt. Gowing is a big proponent. "They are very powerful antioxidants," she explains. Corse is less convinced. "We've got plenty of regular, less expensive berries that are just as fantastic in terms of antioxidant properties," she says. For fans, Corse says several serves (a few tablespoons of the powder or a couple of cups of the berries) are required per week in order to receive any benefit.

Available at organic food stores, www.organicsaustraliaonline.com.au or www.kombuwholefoods.com.au.

4. FREEKEH

Traditionally extracted from green barley or wheat, freekeh is a less processed grain, which CSIRO testing has shown can help manage diabetes and improve colonic health (linked to cancer) with its fibre content. Corse says a cup per week in the diet is excellent for long-term bowel health. Gowing advises using the grain to form the basis of a salad with almonds, capers, raisins, fresh parsley and coriander. Both point out that it does contain some gluten, so is not suitable for coeliacs.

Available at organic food stores and health food stores.

5. POMEGRANATE

Revered for its aphrodisiac qualities in yogic and ayurvedic medicine,

pomegranate, with its red colour, is fantastic in helping to "tonify" the blood, Gowing says. "The sour flavour is also really good for your liver," she claims. Corse says the fruit's powerful natural antibiotic properties make it an ideal choice in the lead-up to winter, where one pomegranate consumed per week provides a significant hit of vitamin C and fatty acids to help ward off winter sickness. Eat as a fruit or use the citrusy seeds in salads or in fish and chicken dishes.

Available at supermarkets and green grocers.

6. GOJI BERRIES

Corse says goji's rich concentration of carotenes makes them more nutrient-dense than classic berries. She advises consuming one to two cups of the dried berries per week in order to reap the health benefits. Gowing is similarly enamoured, explaining they are rich in vitamins A, C and E, zinc and selenium to help with immunity and aid in cancer prevention. The bioflavonoids in the skin and pith aid healing while helping to combat damaging free radicals within the body for better skin and general health. "I use them in muffins," Gowing advises, adding she rehydrates the berries in hot water for 10 minutes and purees, adding this to smoothies or using to top fruit crumbles or yoghurt.

Available at organic food stores or www.organicsaustraliaonline.com.au or www.kombuwholefoods.com.au.

7. QUINOA

Though its appearance suggests otherwise, quinoa is a seed and not a grain, making it a powerful food tool in Gowing's arsenal. "Seeds and vegetables are alkalising, which means they help to break down inflammation in the body," she says. "It's also high in vitamin C and iron, and it has a bitter flavour, which, in Chinese medicine, is said to support liver function." Corse is a little more cautious. "It contains a plant chemical known as saponin, which can irritate the intestines in some people," she explains. "I would limit use to one serve - a cup - per week or even per fortnight because too much can do long-term damage to the digestive system."

Available at organic food stores or www.organicsaustraliaonline.com.au or www.kombuwholefoods.com.au.

8. UMEBOSHI PLUMS

Used frequently in macrobiotic food, the salty-sour dried umeboshi plum is

traditionally used by the Japanese as a way to kill sugar cravings at the end of the meal, says Gowing. "It's very yang, very grounding, so just a lick of it when you have a sugar craving or a hangover can help to ground you and bring you back to balance." Corse says it is a natural antibiotic, and advises eating one a week to maintain a healthy immune system, or one a day if battling an infection. Looking a little like a shrivelled cherry tomato (available either dried or pickled) and hard to stomach on its own, the umeboshi works well in salad dressing, thanks to its acidic nature. Chop finely, squish into a paste and add olive oil, lemon juice and a little sugar. The paste can also be used sparingly on meats as a marinade.

Available at Asian grocers or www.kombuwholefoods.com.au.

9. PURPLE CARROTS

The original carrot undoctored by genetic engineering and cross-breeding (the Dutch bred the orange carrot from a mutation in the 1500s), this varietal is very high in antioxidants and anti-inflammatory properties. Corse advises several serves per week in salad and vegetable dishes over a lifetime to promote good bone health and help prevent rheumatoid arthritis. "To get the best benefits you really have to include them in your diet over the long term," she advises. With the same taste and form as orange carrots, they can be used fresh or cooked.

Available at farmers' markets and organic grocers.

10. SEA VEGETABLES

Rich in iodine and calcium, sea vegetables are ideal for women seeking to conceive, suggests Corse. "They're very concentrated, so even just a couple of teaspoons per week is beneficial," she says of the dried vegetables, which are sold in vacuum-sealed packs. Gowing suggests adding arame and hijiki to soups or stocks in the dried form (they expand when cooked), or soaking them in water to rehydrate before draining and including in salads or when cooking vegetables (they are said to neutralise toxicity given off in the cooking process). They add a sweet-salty taste. "Sea vegetables are some of the most nutritious foods you can eat, so having a bowl of miso soup will also provide you with a really good dose of all those nutrients," she says.

Available at Asian grocers, www.organicsaustraliaonline.com.au or www.kombuwholefoods.com.au.

Goji berries, left, and quinoa.