Soaking Seeds and Nuts

Raw nuts, and even more so raw seeds, have notable levels of phytic acid, a form of bound phosphorous, which serves as a physiological protectant and antioxidant for plants. While phytic acid is useful to safeguard the seeds until germination, when eaten by humans it binds to minerals in the gastrointestinal tract, causing irritation and contributing to the potential for nutrient deficiencies. Some animals naturally produce adequate amounts of the enzyme phytase to breakdown this vexing anti-nutrient, however humans do not, causing phytate-heavy diets to be troublesome. Raw nuts also contain a significant amount of enzyme inhibitors, which act to prevent the nut or seed from sprouting prematurely in nature. Yet these enzyme inhibitors can also bind up minerals and and cause digestive strain for nut-munching humans. Most statements extolling the health benefits of raw nuts and seeds are inaccurate as they fail to take into account the fact that many of the nutrients they contain cannot be properly assimilated in their raw form.

Why does soaking help? The phytates and enzyme inhibitors that make nuts and seeds so tricky to digest can be easily neutralized by soaking in salt water and low temperature dehydrating. The combination of minerals and heat works to break down irritating compounds, while preserving the beneficial fats and proteins. Many traditional cultures intuitively practiced these preparation methods using seawater and the sun, and passed this knowledge down through generations. The tools and techniques of modern science have enabled us to see in an even more detailed way, just how profoundly soaking increases the bioavailability of important nutrients (notably the treasured B vitamins) and activates helpful enzymes that increase nutrient absorption. Unfortunately, this tedious process is cumbersome and costly for large-scale manufacturers, and has been largely lost amidst the packaged convenience foods available today.

How do I soak raw nuts and seeds? As strange as it initially sounds, soaking nuts and seeds is not difficult. Luckily the process of soaking is essentially the same for whatever type of nut or seed you chose to prepare, although the timing varies slightly to accommodate for differences in fat composition, size, texture, etc. Traditional soaked nuts and seeds, are made by following these basic steps:

1. Measure out 4 cups of raw, unsalted, organic nuts/seeds into a medium sized bowl

2. Cover with filtered water so that nuts are submerged

3. Add 1-2 tablespoons unrefined salt

4. Allow to stand covered on the counter for about 7 hours, or overnight

5. Rinse nuts to remove salt residue and spread out in single layer on a rack to dehydrate.

6. Dry at a low temperature (generally no higher than 150°F, although there are exceptions) in dehydrator or oven for 12-24 hours or until nuts are slightly crispy.

These steps are adapted from Nourishing Traditions by Sally Fallon. If you want more information on this and other traditional food topics, I highly recommend getting a copy of her book. Also, see the pretty guide below for specifics regarding popular nut/seed varieties: