A guide for enjoying the fruits of summer

By Denise Sauters
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Eating fruit is an excellent way to get the most nutrition out of your calories, nutrition experts say.

When you think of summer, what comes to mind?

And, for many, it’s the chance to dive into bowls of fresh fruits that ripen in summer and make dinnertime so easy.

Eating fruit also is an excellent way to get the most nutrition out of your calories, nutrition experts say.

“Fruits are a great way to get vitamins, nutrients and fiber in your diet and manage your calorie intake,” said Yvette Graham of Damascus, a program specialist for the Ohio State University Extension Service in Massillon. “Most fruits are naturally low in fat, sodium and calories.”

Graham said one cup of strawberries has only 55 calories. Other tidbits she offers are:

- Strawberries are the only fruit with the seeds on the outside. There are about 200 seeds per strawberry.
- Eight strawberries provide 140 percent of the recommended daily intake of Vitamin C for children.
- The antioxidants in tart cherries continue to increase until they reach peak ripeness.
- Apples are free of fat, sodium and cholesterol.

IS IT RIPE?

So, how do you know when the fruit is ripe at the supermarket or farm stand?

Matt Hunter of North Lawrence, manager of the produce department at Buehler’s Fresh Foods in Jackson Township, said, it often boils down to color.

“Freshness varies from fruit to fruit,” Hunter said. “Mangos are usually better when a little soft and have lots of color. I usually suggest letting us cut a watermelon open for the customer or anything the want to sample. That way they know what they are paying for.”

Graham said to look for fresh-looking fruits that are not bruised, shriveled, moldy or slimy.

“How do you know what looks bad?” Hunter said. “The aroma is the best guide for some foods like cantaloupes and melons. For other fruits, rely on touch and color.”

To keep fruits fresh, Graham recommends only buying enough produce to use within a few days.

“The exceptions are apples, potatoes and citrus fruits that can be stored longer.

“Fresh produce keeps best in the refrigerator crisper with the temperature below 41 degrees,” she said. “The slightly higher humidity in the crisper prevents fruits and vegetables from drying out too much, the opposite problem being too wet. Throw away any product that shows any sign of dehydration or spoilage from excess moisture. If there are other cuts or bruises, remove those.”

KEEPING IT CLEAN

Graham said to handle produce gently at the store or market — keep produce at the top of the cart because putting other items on top can bruise the food, and bruised produce will spoil faster. At home, she said, put produce away without washing first. Moisture allows pathogens to grow and can cause the food to become unsafe.

“If produce must be washed before refrigeration, such as for muddy vegetables picked fresh from the garden, be sure to dry the surface thoroughly with paper towels or in a salad spinner.”

When washing fruit, it is best to wash it in drinkable, running water, slightly warmer than the produce.

AT ITS PEAK

According to Hunter, every fruit has its peak season. According to Hunter, watermelon is available all year.

“Summer is when they taste the best in my opinion. Any kind of berry, peaches and all stone fruit, melons and cherries are summer fruits. Pineapples are available year round,” he said. “Apples in the fall, oranges in the winter. Even though every produce item is available year round, they each have a peak growing season. Cherries are best in the summer. They usually hit peak season around the last week of June or the beginning of July.”

He said peaches and nectarines are best when they are softer. “That is when they have the best flavor,” said the produce manager. “Usually the beginning of July we start getting locally grown peaches.”
EXPERIMENT!
In recent years, grilling fruits has become very popular. Hunter recommends watermelon, peaches, apples, strawberries, coconuts, bananas, and cantaloupe for grilling.

"Just about any fruit can take a light grill," he said. "Experiment to find your best blend."

The same is true for using fruits in drinks, however, Graham said there are fruits, such as bananas, that will not hold up in water. "If you want the fruit to remain attractive, citrus and kiwi are great hosts."

CHERRY-BERRY SMOOTHIE

Ingredients:
3/4 cup canned, pitted red tart cherries in water, chilled in the refrigerator, undrained
1/2 cup low fat milk or dairy-free milk
1/2 cup frozen berries
8 oz, low fat cherry Greek yogurt
1 small banana

Directions:
Place all ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth. More or less milk can be added to achieve desired consistency.

SOURCE: Marie Diniaco Economos, Ohio State University Extension Service

COCONUT LIME DIPPING SAUCE

Ingredients:
3 scallions, minced, white and green
1/3 cup minced red bell pepper
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon dried thyme, crumbled
1 cup coconut milk
1 small can of crushed pineapple, with the juice
3 tablespoons white-wine vinegar
1/4 cup fresh lime juice
zest of one lime
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro

Directions:
Put the chopped green onions, minced bell pepper, garlic, salt, thyme in a heat proof mixing bowl.
Heat the coconut milk with the pineapple juice to just below boiling on the stove top. Stir in vinegar, cook one minute or so.
Pour over the prepped veggies and allow to cool to room temperature.

Add the lime juice, zest, oil and refrigerate if necessary.

SOURCE: Buehler's Fresh Foods

TROPICAL AMBROSIA SALAD

Blend together

Step 1:
1 pineapple
1/2 honeydew melon, diced
1 cantaloupe, diced
2 cups dark or Bing cherries, pitted

Step 2:
7 ounces toasted coconut
1 cup sugared pecans
1 cup Craisins
1 1/2 cups dried bananas

Step 3:
1 cup Greek Vanilla Yogurt

Directions:
Chill 45 minutes before serving (overnight is even better).

SOURCE: Buchler’s Fresh Foods

How to make produce last
I opened my refrigerator the other night to complete disappointment. It wasn’t that I hadn’t made it to the market; in fact, the refrigerator was full of food. Just a few days before, I had placed mountains of fresh vegetables and fruits in the fridge, only to return to wilted leafy greens, moldy berries, limp carrots and squishy eggplant. I felt as rotten as those vegetables when I stuffed so many untouched foods into the compost pile.

I do not have the time to make multiple trips to the market each week to restock the summer produce. So I did a little digging, with the help of the Berkeley, Calif.-based Ecology Center and other sources, to find out how I could keep my produce fresh, crisp and ready to feed my crew for a week after purchasing.

What did I find? I found that storage is everything.

STARTER TIPS

• Buy fresh and local. It’s likely that a freshly picked fruit or vegetable will last longer than an item that has been riding on a truck or camped out in a warehouse for weeks.

• Give your produce space to breathe and you will give it a longer shelf life. In other words, try not to overcrowd your crisper drawers or your fruit bowl. One layer deep is a good rule of thumb.

• Do not store fruits and vegetables together; fruits emit a ripening agent that can ripen and spoil neighboring vegetables. (Placing a ripe banana next to almost anything is a surefire way to ripen the item in the adjacent seat. It’s the same story with any fruit that has started to brown, mold or sour; keep them away from the fresher pieces.)

• Never seal fruits or vegetables in an airtight bag or you will hasten the decay.

• Eat your most perishable items first, so perhaps plan for artichokes and asparagus to be eaten before cucumbers or cauliflowers.

FRUIT STORAGE GUIDE

Apples: Store in crisper drawer of refrigerator, or a cool, dark place outside of the refrigerator.

Avocados: Ripen in a brown paper bag at room temperature, move to the refrigerator when ripe.

Bananas: Do not refrigerate; keep separate from other fruits and vegetables.

Berries: Store unwashed in the refrigerator for one to two weeks, ideally in one layer in a paper bag.

Cherries: Store in the refrigerator unwashed for three to five days. Wash before serving.

Citrus: Store at room temperature because citrus fruits can absorb flavors from other foods in the refrigerator.

Grapes: Store in a paper bag in the fridge.

Kiwi: Keep at room temperature for a few days or in the refrigerator for a week.

Melon: Leave uncut at room temperature, out of the sun.

Mango: Store at room temperature until ripe, then move to the refrigerator.

Papaya: Store at room temperature until ripe, then move to the refrigerator.

Pears: Keep at room temperature. Neighboring apples will hasten a pear’s ripening.

Stone fruit (apricots, nectarines): Store at room temperature stem-end down to ripen, or in the refrigerator when already ripe.

PRODUCE STORAGE GUIDE

Asparagus: Store upright in a glass with water covering the bottom inch of the stems at room temperature for a week.

Beets: Cut off the tops and leaves to retain firmness, and store for one to two weeks in an open container in the refrigerator topped with a wet towel.

Brussels sprouts: Store in an open bowl or container in the refrigerator for one to two weeks.

Cabbage: Store uncut in the refrigerator for up to two weeks.

Carrots: Cut off the tops and leaves to retain firmness, and store for one to two weeks in an open container in the refrigerator topped with a wet towel.

Cauliflower: Store uncut in the refrigerator for a week.

Celery: Store uncut in the refrigerator for two weeks.

Corn: Truly best eaten the day it is picked. Otherwise, store in the refrigerator in its husk for a few days.

Cucumbers: Store at room temperature, not near bananas, melons or tomatoes.
Eggplant: Find a cool, dry, dark place other than the refrigerator.

Garlic: Find a cool, dry, dark place other than the refrigerator.

Green beans: Store in a produce bag or wrapped in a paper towel in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator.

Herbs: Pretend they are a bouquet of flowers and stick the stems in a glass of water and store in the fridge. Wash and use stems and leaves as needed.

Leafy greens: De-stem, then place leaves in a bowl with water and rinse until clean. Dry leaves and wrap in a dish towel, then store in the crisper for a week or more.

Mushrooms: Store in a paper bag in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator for a week. Wash just before using.

Onions: Find a cool, dry, dark place other than the refrigerator.

Potatoes: Find a cool, dry, dark place other than the refrigerator.

Radishes, turnips and parsnips: Cut off the tops and leaves to retain firmness, and store for a few weeks in an open container in the refrigerator with a wet towel on top.

Sprouts: Wrap in a paper towel or produce bag and store in refrigerator for three days.

Summer squash: Store in the refrigerator for five days.

Tomatoes: Do not refrigerate, as they are cold-sensitive. Store them on the counter away from other fruits.

Winter squash: Choose a cool, dry, dark place other than the refrigerator.

If you find yourself with a handful of wilted vegetables despite your best efforts to wrap and store them appropriately, make a soup. Sauté wilted onion, carrots and celery, then add stock, beans, wilted dark leafy greens and a whole grain such as rice or barley. You’ll save the vegetables from the garbage and feed your family all at once.

Try composting any remaining vegetable scraps and inedible stems and leaves. If you do not have a the space at home for a compost pile or bin, try Compost Cab (www.compostcab.com) or the Compost Crew, (www.compostcrew.com), companies that will haul away your food waste, keep it out of landfills, and turn it into rich soil that nurtures the planet.

In my research, I found a National Resources Defense Council statistic stating that “if we wasted just 15 percent less food, it would be enough to feed 25 million Americans.” If my own overflowing trash bin wasn’t enough reason for me to pay more attention when I unloaded the groceries, this certainly is.

By Casey Seldenberg, Special to The Washington Post