

Shopping for Produce

Tips and tricks for the grocery store Written by: Mateja Savoie Roskos and Amy Spielmaker

1 Spend time and choose wisely

Spend the most time in the produce section and choose a variety of fruits and vegetables. The different colors represent the different vitamin, mineral, and phytonutrient content of each fruit or vegetable.

2 Use the freezer

Generally, fruits and vegetables are extremely perishable so should only be purchased a maximum of 1 week before you plan to use them. However, most fruits and vegetables can be frozen, so if there is a big sale (or the food item is in season), it may be a good idea to purchase a larger quantity and freeze for later use. To freeze most fresh fruits and vegetables, follow these steps:

- Choose high quality, fresh fruits or vegetables.
- Blanch the fruit or vegetable (submerge in boiling water), then immerse in ice water. Dry thoroughly.
- Freeze fruits and vegetables quickly in heavy-weight, airtight containers or freezer bags.
- Fill containers to the top and make sure to remove as much air as possible from freezer bags.
- As a general rule, fruits and vegetables that hold up well to cooking will also freeze well.
- For a better texture, eat frozen fruits (like berries) before they're completely thawed.

3 Know which fruits and vegetables have a long shelf life

Although most fruits and vegetables should be consumed within 1 week after purchase, there are a few fruits and vegetables that will keep longer without being frozen. Apples, cranberries, carrots, cabbage, most root vegetables, and winter squash are all produce items that have an extended shelf life. When these foods are on sale, it is a

good idea to purchase them for later consumption. The caveat of course is that you will eat them eventually. In other words, avoid buying a 5-pound bag of carrots that is on sale if you don't foresee a use for the carrots in the future.

4 Think about the term "organic" and learn about the dirty dozen

Organic does not always mean fresh. The term "organic" can be misleading. Organic is simply a method of growing food. Some organic foods have to travel hundreds or thousands of miles to reach the grocery store. Because of the increased travel time, organic produce is not always fresher and usually has a higher price markup than conventionally grown produce. However, occasionally, organic fruits and vegetables can be the same price or cheaper than their conventionally grown counterparts. In this instance, if eating organic is important for you and your family, make sure you know about the dirty dozen. The dirty dozen were the foods with the highest chemical residue. The dirty dozen are chosen by the Environmental Working Group. The group analyzes the Department of Agriculture's data about pesticide residue and ranks food based on the amount of pesticide residue. The dirty dozen for 2012 included:

- Apples
- Bell peppers
- Blueberries (domestic)
- Celery
- Cucumbers
- Grapes
- Lettuce
- Nectarines (imported)
- Peaches
- Potatoes
- Spinach
- Strawberries

5 Take a trip to the local farmers market

Most towns have local markets where you can buy fresh, inexpensive produce. Of course, these markets aren't always the most convenient way to shop because they are usually only once a week and don't have all the grocery items you need. However, they are good to visit because you will likely get great deals, you know the food is fresh, plus, local markets are fun and help the local economy!

6 Go seasonal

Try to focus meals around fruits and vegetables that are in season. These will likely be cheaper and fresher.

7 Maintain quality

All fruits and vegetables should be washed just prior to consumption in order to prolong freshness and quality. Also, fruits and vegetables should generally be kept in the crisper drawers of the refrigerator.

8 Know how to ripen

The ripening of fruits can be sped up by placing the fruit in a paper bag. This is because fruits release ethylene gas as they ripen. This ethylene gas gets trapped in the bag and helps ripen the fruit. For even faster ripening, place the fruit in the bag with another ripening fruit (like an apple). Due to this phenomenon, fruits that you do not want to ripen should be removed from their bags as soon as you return from the grocery store (even plastic bags can trap ethylene).

9 Know ripeness and quality indicators

It's easy to tell if lettuce or cilantro is rotten, the decay and sometimes smell is obvious, but what about melons, apples, oranges, potatoes, or onions? The general rule for fruit is to smell it. If the smell is overly sweet, moldy, or just plain off, then do not buy it! Also, bruises or cuts on the skin are good indicators of quality. Vegetables are more difficult because they always seem to smell a little earthy, which is close to moldy or musty. The best way to determine if they are good or bad is to gently squeeze them. If they are spongy or un-firm, keep looking. For information on ripeness and quality indicators, seasonality, and the proper storage of specific fruits and vegetables, refer to the "Shopping for Fruits" and "Shopping for Vegetables" handouts.