

The Goodness of Vegetables

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True signs of summer are here: warmer temperatures, more daylight hours, and the bustling activity at neighborhood farmers' markets. Daily from Tuesday through Sunday, shoppers can find fresh, local produce at one of many neighborhood markets throughout the region. Looking for produce on a Monday? Head to Pike Place Market. This Seattle icon is open seven days a week to provide fresh produce to shoppers from near and far. While finding a farmers' market in your area is simple, knowing which vegetables to choose and how to prepare them for optimal taste and goodness can be a daunting task.

At each farmers' market, tables of freshly picked carrots, lettuce, beans, squash, beets, tomatoes and more entice shoppers with their smooth skins, sturdy stalks and vibrant jewel tone colors. Bursting with flavor and numerous nutritional merits, locally grown vegetables are true culinary gems. Yet, the flavor experience and nutrient richness of vegetables can quickly diminish without proper storage and handling. Keeping in mind a few simple selection, storage and preparation guidelines can help to capture the just picked freshness of locally grown vegetables yielding a treat for the body and the soul.

For generations, parents have been united in their support of vegetables. Who can forget the frequent reminder to "Eat your vegetables –they're good for you." Full of fiber, vitamins A and C, folate, magnesium, potassium, and phytochemicals while low in fat and calories, vegetables are truly good for us. These nutrients help to optimize the body's functioning.

Along with supporting general health, daily consumption of vegetables appears to protect against chronic diseases. Consuming at least five servings of fruits and vegetables daily has been associated with reduced blood pressure, a key factor in lowering the risk of heart disease and stroke. Eating a variety of vegetables daily also appears to delay the progression of macular degeneration, a leading cause of blindness in older persons. Specific vegetables including broccoli and other cruciferous vegetables may also protect against specific cancers. With all of these health benefits, it is no wonder that vegetable plants have made it to the South Lawn of the White House.

Yet, despite the benefits of vegetables, nearly 70% of adults in the U.S. are not taking in the recommended 3 or more servings of vegetables daily according to data from the 2005 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. While many reasons may explain this underconsumption of vegetables, one of the underlying causes may be a lack of pleasure in eating vegetables. If so, serving vegetables at their peak freshness may elevate the flavor experience and thus, the number of servings consumed.

Growing your own vegetables provides the shortest route from field to plate and the best way to capture the just picked freshness. Vegetable growers can instantly take vegetables out of the soil and place them on their dinner plate. Yet, space or time constraints often curtail many grow-it-yourself efforts.

Thankfully, locally grown produce is only minutes away at one of the one hundred Puget Sound area

summer farmers' markets. The Cascade Harvest Coalition lists these summer farmers' markets on its Puget Sound Fresh website, www.pugetsoundfresh.org/farmers_markets.htm

The first step to a satisfying vegetable experience is making smart purchasing decisions. When searching for the freshest vegetables at a farmers' market, the farmer can be your best resource. Siri Erickson-Brown of Local Roots Farm encourages shoppers to start a conversation with farmers and ask when the various vegetables were picked. She adds that in general the more recently vegetables are picked, the better. This is especially true for salad greens, peas, beans, cherry tomatoes and broccoli. Cindy Krepky of Dog Mountain Farm also adds that if the person in the market stall cannot tell you when the item was harvested, they are probably not the farmer. If this occurs, she recommends finding another market stall that can provide harvesting answers. Other helpful vegetable purchasing suggestions include the following:

- Shop early for the best selection.
- Look for brightly colored, vibrant, crisp vegetables.
- Shop with meal ideas in mind.
- Buy only the amount you can use in 2-4 days--except root vegetables which can be stored several weeks.

Once purchased, handle vegetables with care. Heading straight home after a farmers' market stop is best. If this is not possible, keep vegetables in a cooler during transport. Once home, most vegetables are best stored in the refrigerator especially anything leafy and green. Here are suggested storage lengths for refrigerated vegetables.

General Refrigeration Storage Length Recommendations for Fresh Vegetables

Specific Vegetables	Storage Length
Asparagus, Fava Beans, Unhusked Corn, Leafy Greens (Collards, Kale, Mustard), Salad Greens, Spinach	1-3 days
Broccoli, Cauliflower, Brussels Sprouts, Beans, Peas, Scallions, Cucumbers, Eggplant, Mushrooms, Summer Squash	3-5 days
Beets, Bell Peppers, Cabbage, Carrots, Parsnips, Radishes, Turnips	1-2 weeks

Both Siri and Cindy recommend keeping fresh vegetables in closed plastic bags. As an alternative to plastic bags, Siri recommends that salad greens be stored in a salad spinner in the refrigerator after rinsing the greens in water and drying well. Chef Shannon Galusha from Bastille Café & Bar recommends removing the leafy green tops of carrots, beets, and turnips before storing. He adds, "If these vegetables are stored with the tops they will spoil quickly as the green tops pull moisture away from the roots."

Removing any tight strings or rubber bands will also help to retain freshness by allowing the vegetables to “breathe.”

Several vegetables are not recommended for refrigeration. Onions and potatoes can be placed in separate open weave bags to allow air circulation and then set in a cool, dark place. Other vegetables that are best stored in a similar location include garlic, shallots, sweet potatoes, and winter squash. To preserve flavor and aid in ripening, tomatoes can be stored on the counter out of direct sunlight.

Susie Craig, Food Safety Expert with the Washington State University Extension, offers several handling and storage guidelines to minimize the risk of foodborne illness:

- Before handling produce, wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap. Use a paper towel to dry hands.
- When rinsing produce, run water over it. Avoid placing produce in a sink or bowl filled with water. If there are bacteria on one piece, they can spread via the water to all of the produce.
- Avoid using dish detergents to clean fruits and vegetables. They may leave residues on your produce that could be harmful to your health. If you want to use a wash, find a commercial one that is approved for this purpose.

Freezing and canning are two options for extending the storage length. According to Cindy, fava beans can be blanched, peeled and frozen for up to six months. Chef Maria Hines of Tilth Restaurant cans ripe tomatoes for use throughout the year. Interested in preserving food at home? Check out step-by-step instructions for preserving numerous types of produce at The National Center for Home Preservation’s website (www.uga.edu/nchfp). The Center’s research based preservation methods help home cooks to lock in freshness and keep food safe to eat during extended storage.

Whether eating local vegetables on the way home from the market or after storage, simple preparations are best. Keeping preparations simple lets the natural goodness of freshly picked vegetables shine through. Lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, bell peppers, and broccoli only need a quick wash before they can be enjoyed in a salad or sliced for a refreshing snack.

Chef Galusha seeks to retain the just picked flavor by cooking or manipulating the foods as little as possible. Using carrot soup as an example he explains, “If we cook the carrot just until tender (and not for hours) and with something as simple as fresh milk the true and pure flavor of a great carrot should shine through.”

Cooking most vegetables to a tender-crisp texture helps retain nutrients as well as color and flavor. Potatoes are one exception. They need to be cooked until the tip of a knife easily pierces the flesh. Yet, cooking them with the peel holds in nutrients found close to the skin.

Sautéing, steaming, roasting, and grilling are three vegetable cooking methods that retain nutrients and flavor. Siri recommends sautéing vegetables in a small amount of olive oil and garlic. She adds, “Sautéing is great for many of those intriguing vegetables at the market that you are not sure how to prepare.” In June, she suggests sautéing a bunch of baby radishes using the recipe below.

Sautéed Bunched Baby Radishes:

- Trim off greens leaving only a sprig attached.
- Cut radishes in ½ lengthwise (can substitute baby white turnips).
- Sauté radish halves in a small amount of olive oil on medium heat until slightly translucent and juicy but not mushy.
- Add chopped green tops and cook just until they wilt and turn bright green.
- Serve.

Steaming vegetables is another simple cooking method that preserves the nutrients, bright color and flavor of vegetables. Adding a broth or seasoning to the simmering water provides additional flavor. Almost any vegetable can be steamed including, broccoli, string beans, beets, sweet corn, and cauliflower.

Roasting vegetables intensifies their natural flavor. As the vegetables roast, their natural sugars caramelize as water evaporates, concentrating the flavor. Plus, only a touch of olive oil is needed to prevent the vegetables from sticking to the pan. Vegetables that can be roasted include baby turnips, beets, carrots, broccoli, onions, peppers, summer squash, cherry tomatoes, eggplant, and potatoes. Roasting vegetables in aluminum foil helps minimize clean-up.

Grilling vegetables helps keep the heat outside. A light brushing with olive or canola oil keeps the vegetables moist and easy to turn. Placing small vegetable pieces on aluminum foil, in a grill basket or on a skewer prevents them from slipping through the rack.

How fortunate we are to have a plethora of fresh vegetables available at nearby farmers' markets. Stop by a market this week, talk with the farmers and pick up an assortment of just picked vegetables. Treat your taste buds to the enticing flavors and textures while providing your body with a health boost. Enjoy and Bon Appétit!

Helpful Websites:

- To find a farmers' market near you, check out the Cascade Coalition's Puget Fresh Website www.pugetsoundfresh.org/farmers_markets.htm
- To learn more about Local Roots Farm and Dog Mountain Farm, check out their websites:
 - Local Roots Farm (www.localrootsfarm.com)
 - Dog Mountain Farm (www.dogmtfarm.com)
- Keep current with food safety with weekly podcasts at Food Safety in a Minute: <http://cahenews.wsu.edu/foodsafety/index.html>
- Find home preservation guidance from the National Center for Home Food Preservation www.uga.edu/nchfp

www.Seattlefoodnut.com