Shopping for Produce

# Tips and tricks for the grocery store

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1. Spend time and choose wisely

* Spend most of your time in the produce section. Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables.
* The different colors show the different vitamins and nutrients of each fruit or vegetable.

1. Use the freezer

* Fruits and vegetables usually go bad quickly. You should buy them, at most, 1 week before you plan to use them. Most fruits and vegetables can be frozen. If there is a big sale or the food item is in season, it may be good to buy a larger amount and freeze to use later. To freeze most fresh fruits and vegetables, follow these steps:
  + Choose high quality, fresh fruits or vegetables
  + Submerge the fruit or vegetable in boiling water, then immerse it in ice water. Dry well.
  + Freeze fruits and vegetables quickly in heavy-weight, air-tight containers or freezer bags.
  + As a general rule, fruits and vegetables that cook well will also freeze well.
  + For a better texture, eat frozen fruits (like berries) before they’re completely thawed.

1. Know which fruits and vegetables have a long shelf life

* Although most fruits and vegetables should be eaten within 1 week after buying them, 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 a long shelf life. When these foods are on sale, it is a good idea to buy them to eat later. However, avoid buying a 5-pound bag of carrots that are on sale if you don’t think you will use them.

1. Choose healthy options within your budget

* Many food companies tell us that ‘organic foods are the clean foods’ and ‘fresh is best’ etc. Buying fresh and organic foods can be a healthy choice, but organic foods sometimes cost more. There are lower cost options so that we can eat healthily for less money.
* Organic versus non-organic or conventionally grown produce:
  + Organic is a way to grow food, not nutrient quality. Produce can be called ‘organic’ if it was grown in a place that was checked by the USDA. To become USDA organic certified, farmers must follow certain rules. They must use natural products for things like improving soil and weed control. It costs more to grow organic produce, so there are fewer organic farms in the country. This means that some organic foods travel much further than non-organic foods. More travel time means organic produce is not always fresher and can cost more at the store.
  + Conventionally grown produce is not grown on organic certified farms. Many safety measures are still used to provide safe food. Conventional produce can provide the same nutrition as organic products. Buying conventional produce may be a way to save money.
  + Whether choosing organic or conventionally grown produce, look for produce that is on sale or in season to get the most nutrition for your dollar.

1. Take a trip to the local farmer’s market

* Most towns have local markets where you can buy fresh, low-cost produce. These markets aren’t always the easiest way to shop. They are usually only once a week and might not have all the items you need. However, they are good to visit because you will likely receive great deals and you know the food is fresh. Local markets are also fun and help the local economy.

1. Go seasonal

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

1. Maintain quality

* All fruits and vegetables should be washed just before eating to keep it better for longer. Fruits and vegetables should usually be kept in the crisper drawers of the refrigerator.

1. 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 another fruit in the bag, like an apple.
* Due to this fact, 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 gas.

1. Know ripeness and quality indicators

* The general rule to check the ripeness 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 to check for ripeness because they always seem to smell earthy, which is close to moldy. The best way to know if they are good or bad is to gently squeeze them. If they are spongy or soft, keep looking. For information on ripeness and quality, seasonality, and the proper storage for specific fruits and vegetables, use the “Shopping for Fruits” and “Shopping for Vegetables” handouts.

1. Fresh versus Frozen versus Canned

* It is a common error that ‘fresh is always best’. Sometimes fresh produce travels a long way to the store, so workers must pick the product before it is fully ripe. Frozen fruits and vegetables are picked when perfectly ripe and full of nutrients. Then they are frozen right away to preserve the nutrient quality. This means an out-of-season or unripe fresh fruit will have less nutrient value than the lower cost frozen version. If in-season fresh produce is not available or not in the budget, try the lower cost frozen or canned versions instead!
* Key things to look for when choosing fresh, frozen, or canned produce are:
  + Fresh: In season with no add ins (such as caramelized nuts, syrups, sauces, etc.)
  + Frozen: Read the ingredient list and choose bags with no added sugars, syrups or salt.
  + Canned: Choose ‘sodium-free’ (vegetables) or ‘in its own juice’ (fruits) rather than salted vegetables or fruit in syrup.

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