

Shopping for Produce

Tips and tricks for the grocery store Written by: Mateja Savoie Roskos, Amy Spielmaker and Lea Palmer.

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, air-tight 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 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 option, but those options are sometimes more expensive. Luckily, there are many lower cost options so that we can eat healthy on a limited budget.

Organic versus Conventionally (non-organic) Grown Produce

Organic simply describes a method of growing food, not the nutrient quality. Produce can be called 'organic' if it was grown in an area that was USDA certified. To become USDA organic certified, farmers must follow specific guidelines and use natural products for things like improving soil quality and weed control. It is more expensive 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. Because of this increased travel time, organic produce is not always fresher and can cost more at the store.

Conventionally grown produce is not grown on organic certified farms, but many precautions are still taken to provide safe foods. Conventional produce can provide the same nutrition as organic produce and 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.



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

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.

10 Fresh vs. Frozen vs. Canned

It is a common misconception that 'fresh is always best'. Sometimes fresh produce travels long distances to the store, so producers must harvest before the produce is fully ripe. Frozen fruits and vegetables are harvested when perfectly ripe and full of nutrients and then 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 for healthy alternatives!

Key things to look for when choosing fresh, frozen, or canned produce:

- 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 it's own juice' (fruits) rather than salted vegetables or fruit in syrup.

