

Ask an Expert: Five Tips for the Perfect Picnic



Picnics are the perfect way to get out and enjoy the outdoors without going too far or spending a lot of money. Picnicking can fit almost any budget and can be as simple or elaborate as you want it to be. Some of the best picnics happen on the spur of the moment and don't need a lot of planning. No picnic basket? No problem. Anything that holds your supplies will do.

Consider these tips for the perfect picnic.

* Pack your picnic with food safety in mind. If you will be gone longer than 2 hours from departure to eating, plan to pack a cooler. After 2 hours at room temperature (1 hour if temperatures are around 90 F), harmful bacteria that can cause food poisoning multiply rapidly. USDA guidelines say cold foods should be kept as close to 40 F as possible and hot foods should be kept above 140 F.

* Keep your cooler ready. If you are planning to make picnics a regular part of your summer, consider investing in a cooler-on-wheels for portability. To help keep foods cold, chill them in the refrigerator before packing and keep them in the cooler until serving time.

* Get double duty from your cooler space. Fill empty drink bottles half full of water or juice and freeze. The frozen drinks will act as ice packs to keep the picnic cool in transit. At your destination, top off the bottles with water or a drink to enjoy with your meal.

* Be mindful of your picnic location. When planning your food items, consider where you are going. Even if it's just to the park, it will help you prepare by considering the setting. Avoid anything that gets drippy, limp or wimpy in warm weather. Gelatin salad is a perfect example of what not to take, and even tossed salads will wilt if left in the sun or warm weather for very long.

* Make a menu. For a no-fuss menu, have a fix-your-own sandwich bar. Fill plastic containers with pre-sliced sandwich fixings such as lettuce, tomatoes, cheeses, meats, bell peppers, olives, mushrooms, onions and spinach. Set out hearty breads, crusty rolls or tortilla wraps and condiments. To add a gourmet touch, splurge on a couple of interesting spreads, such as pesto, tapenade or flavored soft cheese. Everyone can build a custom sandwich for a fraction of what it would cost at the deli.

* Sometimes the fun of a summer picnic is the spontaneity, and having fruits and vegetables on hand will make packing a breeze. Simple finger food, like carrots, celery, sliced jicama and sliced bell peppers are cool, crispy additions to any picnic plate and a great way to include vegetables. Add a vegetable dip, and you have a quick and easy side dish.

* Keep supplies on hand. If you plan to picnic frequently this summer, make a standard packing list for spur-of-the-moment jaunts, and keep your pantry stocked with food that is suitable for a picnic. Include the following items on your supply list: napkins, plates, cups, dinnerware; garbage bags; plastic bags that seal; serving utensils and cutting knives; can opener; cutting mat or board; salt and pepper, packets of condiments; blanket to sit on; hand sanitizer, wet wipes or a wet washcloth in a plastic bag; paper towels; insect repellent; extra water; and don't forget equipment for activities including balls, games, Frisbees, etc.

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