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9 “Bites” for Better Tasting Fruits & Vegetables

The summer months provide a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension in Lancaster County has come up with several preparation and storage “bites” that will help you enjoy produce at its peak of flavor, appearance, and safety. You will find some very useful and helpful information in their following article.

Bite 1. Prevent cut fruit from turning brown.

Keep cut fruits, such as apples, pears, bananas and peaches, from turning brown by coating them with an acidic juice such as lemon, orange or pineapple juice. Or use a commercial anti-darkening preparation with fruits, such as Fruit-Fresh®, and follow the manufacturer's directions.

Another method to prevent browning is to mix them with acidic fruits like oranges, tangerines, grapefruit and other citrus fruit or pineapple. Prepare the acidic fruit(s) first. Then, cut the other fruits, mixing them with in the acidic fruit(s) as you prepare them.

Cut fruits as close to serving time as possible. Cover and refrigerate cut fruit until ready to serve. Refrigerate peeled/cut fruits and vegetables so they are at room temperature no longer than 2 hours.

Bite 2. Make the most of your melon baller.

Melon ballers can save valuable time in preparing fruits and veggies. Even if you never make melon balls, use a melon baller to:

Core apples and pears. Cut away the inner membrane from peppers. Scoop out the inside of a cherry tomato and make tiny stuffed appetizers. Try stuffing the tomatoes with your favorite tuna salad sandwich mixture. Remove seeds and surrounding pulp from fruits and veggies like cucumbers, tomatoes, zucchini papaya and kiwi. Scoop out the insides of potatoes for twice-baked potatoes.

Bite 3. Take a salad spinner for a spin!

Salad dressing slides off damp salad greens and collects in the bottom of the salad bowl. You'll get more flavor with less dressing (and fewer calories!) if salad greens are washed and dried before tossing your salad with dressing. A tablespoon of an oil and vinegar dressing may be all it takes for two cups of dried salad greens. A salad spinner uses centrifugal force to remove water from freshly washed salad greens and herbs. Pack greens lightly to avoid overcrowding and

bruising them. After spinning, pat off any remaining moisture with clean paper towels.

Bite 4. Do this with radishes before refrigeration.

If the leafy radish tops are attached, remove them before storing. Radishes don't keep as well if their tops are left on. Store unwashed radishes in an open or perforated plastic bag in a refrigerator crisper drawer that is separate from the one in which you store fruits. Wash radishes and trim their roots just before using.

Bite 5. Wash fruits and vegetables correctly.

The Food and Drug Administration recommend the following preparation tips for fresh produce: Many pre-cut, bagged produce items like lettuce are pre-washed. If so, it will be stated on the packaging. This pre-washed, bagged produce can be used without further washing.

As an extra measure of caution, you can wash the produce again just before you use it. Pre-cut or pre-washed produce in open bags should be washed before using.

Begin with clean hands. Wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap before and after preparing fresh produce.

Cut away any damaged or bruised areas on fresh fruits and vegetables before preparing or eating. Produce that looks rotten should be discarded.

All unpacked fruits and vegetables, as well as those packaged and not marked pre-washed, should be thoroughly washed before eating. This suggestion includes produce grown conventionally or organically at home, or produce that is purchased from a grocery store or farmer's market. **Wash fruits and vegetables under running water just before eating, cutting, or cooking.**

Even if you plan to peel the produce before eating, it is still important to wash it first.

Washing fruits and vegetables with soap or detergent or using commercial produce washes is not recommended.

Scrub firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers, with a clean produce brush.

Drying produce with a clean cloth towel or paper towel may further reduce bacteria that may be present.

Bite 6. Separate fruits and vegetables from these foods.

“Keep fruits and vegetables that will be eaten raw separate from other foods such as raw meat, poultry or seafood - and from kitchen utensils used for those products,” advises the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Some of their suggestions are:

Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops with hot water and soap between the preparation of raw meat, poultry, and seafood products and the preparation of produce that will not be cooked.

For added protection, kitchen sanitizers can be used on cutting boards and countertops periodically. Try a solution of one teaspoon of chlorine bleach to one quart of water.

If you use plastic or other nonporous cutting boards, run them through the dishwasher

Bite 7. Keep fruits and vegetables separate in the refrigerator.

Store fruits in a refrigerator crisper drawer separate from the one in which you store vegetables. Fruits give off ethylene gas which can shorten the storage life of vegetables. Some vegetables give off odors that can be absorbed by fruits and affect their quality.

Bite 8. Know which fruits ripen after they're picked.

Apricots, bananas, cantaloupe, kiwi, nectarines, peaches, pears, plantains and plums continue to ripen after they're picked. The tomato, which is actually a fruit, also continues to ripen after picking.

Fruits that you should pick or buy ripe and ready-to-eat include: apples, cherries, grapefruit, grapes, oranges, pineapple, strawberries, tangerines and watermelon.

To speed the ripening of fruits such as peaches, pears, and plums, put them in a ripening bowl or in a loosely closed **brown paper bag** at room temperature. Plastic bags don't work for ripening.

Bite 9: Refrigerate fruits and vegetables in perforated plastic bags.

This helps maintain moisture yet provides for air flow. Unperforated plastic bags can lead to the growth of mold or bacteria. If you don't have access to commercial, food-grade, perforated bags, use a sharp object to make several small holes in a food-grade plastic bag (about 20 holes per medium-size bag).

For more information on this topic, please feel free to contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 157.

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