



Ingredients Guide

A supplement to Inova Health System's *Sustainable Foods, Healthy Lives Cookbook*



This Ingredients Guide features detailed information on more than 65 fruits & vegetables commonly found in Virginia farmers' markets, roadside stands, CSA boxes and backyard gardens throughout the course of the year.

It can be used as a resource to help you identify, select, store, prepare and talk about your favorite ingredients, and to learn about new ones as well.



Be sure to check out the *Sustainable Foods, Healthy Lives Cookbook* at www.inova.org/sustainablefoodscookbook for great recipes that include these fresh and healthy ingredients.



Ingredients List

Apples	Lettuce
Artichokes	Mushrooms
Asparagus	Mustard Greens
Beets	Nectarines
Beet Greens	Okra
Blackberries	Onions
Blueberries	Parsnips
Broccoli	Peaches
Brussels Sprouts	Pears
Cabbage	Peas
Cantaloupe	Peppers (Bell)
Carrots	Peppers (Chili)
Cauliflower	Persimmon
Celeriac	Plums
Celery	Potatoes
Cherries	Pumpkins
Collard Greens	Radishes
Corn	Ramps
Cranberries	Raspberries
Cucumbers	Rhubarb
Dandelion Greens	Rutabaga
Eggplant	Spinach
Fava Beans	Squash (Summer)
Fennel	Squash (Winter)
Fiddleheads	Strawberries
Garlic	Sweet Potatoes
Grapes	Swiss Chard
Green Beans	Tomatillos
Green Onions	Tomatoes
Honeydew	Turnips
Kale	Turnip Greens
Kohlrabi	Watermelons
Leeks	Zucchini

Ingredients A-Z



Apples

Season: Fall

Characteristics: Apples may range in size from a little larger than a cherry to as large as a grapefruit. While some varieties work well for all purposes, others are best for more specific uses such as baking in desserts or turning into applesauce. As one of the country's top apple-producing states, Virginia apple growers produce many popular varieties of this crisp, delectable fruit.

Selection: Look for firm, deeply colored apples with smooth, unblemished skin.

Storage: Apples continue to ripen after they have been picked, and ripen six to ten times faster at room temperature than if refrigerated. For short-term storage, refrigerate apples for one to three weeks in a ventilated plastic bag or crisper drawer. Be careful not to mix apples with other vegetables, since they slowly release an ethylene gas which will spoil any vegetables in its immediate vicinity.

Fun Fact: The average U.S. consumer eats an estimated 45 pounds of apples each year.



Artichokes

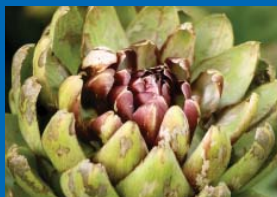
Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Ranging in color from dark green to purple, this tough and spiny vegetable features a mild, earthy flavor. Generally, the entire head of artichoke is cooked and then the various parts are consumed. Artichokes are most commonly grilled, steamed, roasted, fried or sautéed. Artichoke hearts, which are found at the center of the artichoke, are a delicacy prized by many chefs. Also available are baby artichokes, which are generally found wherever artichokes are sold. Far more tender than full-grown artichokes, these small buds are picked or pruned early in the growth process. With minimal preparation, the entire bud can be eaten raw or cooked.

Selection: Select deep green artichokes that are heavy for their size and have tight, compact leaves. Press the leaves against each other and listen – the freshest artichokes should produce a squeaking sound when squeezed.

Storage: Artichokes should be eaten as soon as possible, but will last up to one week if stored in a plastic bag in the fridge.

Fun Fact: Artichokes turn brown when exposed to air. To avoid this, place trimmed pieces of raw artichoke in a large bowl of cool water with a whole lemon squeezed into it until you're ready to cook them.



How to Eat an Artichoke

- 1) Cut off the sharp leaf tips.
- 2) Cook the artichoke (boiled in salted water, steamed or grilled) for 20 - 45 minutes or until tender. If boiling, leave pot uncovered to prevent it from turning brown. You will know the artichoke is done when you pull at a leaf and it comes away with little resistance.
- 3) Drain the artichoke upside down.
- 4) Remove the outer leaves one by one and hold like a cracker. The edible part is at the base of the leaf, where it was attached to the heart, and should be lighter in color than the outer leaf. Dip this part in your dressing of choice (aioli, melted butter, ranch dressing, etc) and use your teeth to pull off the edible part of the leaf. The "good part" will detach from the woodier, more fibrous part. 5) Continue until you get to the smaller center leaves that don't have much meatiness to them. Pull off the center leaves to expose the "choke" of the artichoke - a fine, hair-like growth just on top of the heart of the artichoke.
- 6) Remove the choke using gentle strokes with a fork or kitchen knife until you reach the heart. Scoop out the heart and eat it for a tasty, delicate treat.



Asparagus

Season: Spring

Characteristics: Asparagus is generally bright green in color, and has a mild savory flavor and delicate texture that becomes tougher as it ages. It can be broiled, steamed, grilled, roasted, sautéed or eaten raw, and the entire spear is edible. Asparagus is most tender in the springtime but is readily available throughout the summer and fall in Virginia.

Selection: Choose fresh spears with firm, straight, smooth, rich green stalks and dry, tightly-closed, compact tips. Select stalks of uniform thickness so the spears will cook more evenly. Smaller stalks will cook more quickly. Snap off the tough, woody ends just before cooking.

Storage: Fresh asparagus should be used as soon as possible but will retain its freshness longer when kept cold and covered. Wrap the stalk-ends in damp paper towels, cover and refrigerate or set stalks upright in 1-2" cold water, cover with a plastic bag and refrigerate.

Fun Fact: Most asparagus sold in the United States is green, but some farmers' markets will offer purple and white varieties as well. White asparagus has a milder flavor and is more tender in texture, while purple asparagus is fruitier in flavor.



Beets

Season: Available year-round

Characteristics: The beet plant is 100% edible, from its large, green, crumpled leaves to its vibrantly hued stalks and bulbous round roots. Though most often boiled or baked (beets are notorious for their extensive cooking times), these rock-hard root vegetables may also be juiced or grated and served as a crunchy topping for salads. Although typically a vibrant reddish-purple hue on the inside, beets also come in varieties with white, golden and even rainbow-colored roots.

Selection: Choose firmly textured beets with fresh, green, healthy leaves attached at the top. It is generally recommended to choose small- to medium-sized beets since larger beets have thicker skins, are more difficult to cut, take longer to cook, and tend to be woody and tough.

Storage: Refrigerate beets in a plastic bag for two to three weeks. Remove all but two inches of the greens (if present) to extend the life of the bulbs – with greens attached, they will only stay fresh for three to four days.

Fun Fact: Beets are known for their powerful red pigment, which has been used as a natural red dye since the 16th century. Be careful with this bright juice, though – it has been known to stain dish towels, wooden cutting boards, sinks, clothes and hands.



Beet Greens

Season: Spring, Summer

Characteristics: Beet greens are the leaves connected to the tops of the beets, and are almost exclusively available when attached to freshly dug beets. Similar in flavor to Swiss chard (though slightly more bitter), beet greens can be prepared in the same way as turnips, collards, chards, or any other hearty green vegetables – simply wash the leaves and eat fresh, steamed, boiled or sautéed.

Selection: Fresh beet greens will be a healthy, bright, deep green color, and may contain some red pigment in the stems.

Storage: Fresh beet greens don't keep for very long but can be stored in a perforated plastic bag in the refrigerator for one to three days.

Fun Fact: Modern beets are derived from wild sea beets that originated around the coasts of Europe, the Middle East and Africa.





Blackberries

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Blackberries are very dark purple to almost black in color and have smooth, fragile skin. Depending on ripeness, they have a range of distinctive flavors varying from sweet to tart. Blackberries are often enjoyed eaten out of hand, and are also popular for use in desserts, jams, jellies and even wine. Sometimes called brambleberries because they grow wild on bramble vines, there are many species and hybrids of blackberries, including the dewberry and the loganberry.



Selection: Select berries that are bright, clean and fresh. Ripe blackberries will be an even-colored deep purple or black and will have a plump, full feel. Choose berries that are fully ripened, since unripe berries will not ripen once picked.

Storage: Store unwashed blackberries in the refrigerator for two to three days. Blackberries also freeze well.

Fun Fact: Blackberries are aggregate fruits, meaning the 'berry' we know as the blackberry is actually many tiny berries combined together. These tiny berries are called drupes – a type of fruit in which the outer fleshy part surrounds a seed (i.e. peaches, plums, etc).



Blueberries

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Blueberries are small, round fruits that range in size from that of a small pea to a marble. They are deep in color, from blue to maroon to purple-black, and have flavors that range from mildly sweet (cultivated) to tart and tangy (wild). The skin of the blueberry surrounds a semi-transparent flesh encasing tiny, edible seeds. Blueberries also feature a waxy, dusty white "bloom" that covers the berry's surface and protects it from the sun. This bloom indicates freshness.



Selection: Select deep blue berries that are firm, plump and have a silver-white frost (the bloom) on the outside. Like blackberries, unripe blueberries will not ripen after they are picked, so avoid those that are red or green as they are immature and will be sour to the taste.

Storage: Refrigerate in a covered container for up to a week. Prior to refrigerating, sort through the berries and remove any damaged ones. Blueberries also freeze well.

Fun Fact: Blueberries are one of the few edible fruits native to North America.



Broccoli

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Broccoli is identified by its firm, light green stalk and branching arms that end in umbrella-shaped clusters of dark green florets. Broccoli is sold in either whole stalks or just the crowns, and can be eaten raw or cooked. It can range in taste from slightly sweet to slightly bitter, depending on when it is harvested and how long it is stored. Every part of the broccoli plant is edible. Though the vast majority of broccoli sold in North America is dark green in color, purple and gold varieties can also be found at some farmers markets.



Selection: Florets should be tightly bunched and dark green in color. Stalks should be smooth and firm but not tough. Choose smaller broccoli plants to avoid woody, fibrous stems.

Storage: Fresh broccoli may be stored in a loosely sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator for four to seven days.

Fun Fact: To revive limp, wilted broccoli, trim 1/2" from the base of the stalk and place in a glass of cold water in the refrigerator overnight.





Brussels Sprouts

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: The tiny, edible buds of Brussels sprouts resemble miniature cabbages and grow in clusters of 20 to 40 on tall, thick stalks. Most sprouts tend to range from 1" to 1½" in size. When cooked properly, Brussels sprouts have a delicate, nutty, lightly sweet flavor and are most often pan-fried, baked, boiled or steamed. While the majority of Brussels sprouts are dark green in color, purple varieties also exist and may be found at farmers' markets or specialty stores.



Selection: Look for firm sprouts with tightly closed, bright green heads. Selecting sprouts of a uniform size will help ensure even cooking. Smaller buds generally taste sweeter.



Storage: When stored properly, fresh Brussels sprouts should keep for four to seven days. Place sprouts in a loosely sealed bag and store in the refrigerator. Sprouts stored on the stalk will keep longer. Use Brussels sprouts as quickly as possible since their delicate flavor becomes stronger and more bitter with age.

Fun Fact: Think you don't like Brussels sprouts? Maybe you haven't tried them at cooked properly. Not only do overcooked Brussels sprouts have an unpleasant, mushy texture and grayish coloring, but they also release a foul-smelling gas which causes many people to dislike this healthy, delicious veggie.



Cabbage

Season: Available year-round

Characteristics: Characterized by tightly layered leaves that form a compact head, with darker, looser leaves surrounding the outside, cabbage is remarkably flexible in culinary terms. It can be served raw, braised, sautéed, pickled or slow-cooked in soups or stews. The flavor of cabbage is bright and crisp when raw but becomes mellow and sweeter as it cooks. Cabbage is generally available in two varieties - red and green - though specialty varieties such as Savoy, Chinese, bok choy and Napa are also becoming more widely available.



Selection: Look for vividly colored, unblemished leaves with crisp, bright, moist-looking edges and firm, fresh-cut ends. The cabbage head should be compact and firm, with a couple leaves loose on the outside.



Storage: Wrap cabbage in a loosely sealed plastic bag and refrigerate up to two weeks. Shredding cabbage before storage will reduce its shelf life.

Fun Fact: Darker colored cabbages contain more nutrients than lighter ones, with red cabbage winning the prize for most nutritious.



Cantaloupe

Season: Summer

Characteristics: The cantaloupe is a round, sweet melon with a hard, craggy pale green or golden rind that is net-like in appearance. Cantaloupe is most often eaten raw. The fruit's sweet flavor, velvety texture and bright yellow-orange or delicate pale green flesh makes it a delicious breakfast or dessert, while its high water content makes it an especially refreshing summer snack.



Selection: Choose cantaloupes with a sweet, fruity fragrance. They should be round, firm and heavy for their size, with a thick raised netting on the outside.

Storage: Cantaloupes may be left at room temperature in a cool, airy place to ripen. They should be refrigerated once ripened. To preserve cut melons, wrap with plastic and store in the refrigerator, keeping in mind that their aromatic smell will penetrate other foods.



Fun Fact: The true 'cantaloupe' is a hard-shelled melon that is not grown much outside the Mediterranean region. It's actually muskmelons – with their soft rinds and netted surface markings – that are so popular worldwide, and that we commonly refer to as cantaloupes.

Caution!

Though it is wise to wash all fruits and vegetables before cutting, washing the rind of the cantaloupe is especially important since potentially harmful bacteria are more easily harbored in its netted rind.



Carrots

Season: Spring, Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Carrots can range in shape and size from long tapers to small round balls, and vary in color from deep orange to yellow, purple and deep red. They have a crisp, crunchy texture and sweet taste, making them a favorite for snacking. An extremely versatile ingredient used across many different cuisines, carrots can be boiled, blanched, steamed, braised, fried, sautéed, baked, microwaved or eaten raw. The most commonly eaten part of the carrot plant is its thick, colorful taproot, though the green, parsley-like tops are also edible.



Selection: Select small- to medium-sized carrots that are crisp, firm and brightly colored, with bright green feathery tops.



Storage: With their greens detached, carrots can be stored for two weeks to one month in a loosely sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator. Take care not to store with apples, pears or other fragrant fruits, though, as the carrots will absorb their odors.

Fun Fact: True baby carrots – the immature root of the carrot plant and not the milled down versions of regular carrots sold as “baby carrots” in bags at grocery stores – are available in the spring and early summer.



Cauliflower

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: A member of the cabbage family, cauliflower grows in a compact head shielded from sunlight by its outer leaves. When cooked properly, it has a mild cabbage-like flavor and aroma – though, like other members of the cabbage family, it becomes gray, mushy and rank-smelling when overcooked. Generally only the head of the cauliflower is eaten, though its leaves are also edible. Cauliflower can be consumed raw or cooked. It is most often available in its white form, though orange, green and vibrant purple varieties, as well as dwarf varieties and hybrids, are becoming increasingly available.



Selection: Select firm, compact cauliflower heads with tightly packed florets (buds), a creamy white color and fresh, bright green leaves.



Storage: Refrigerate cauliflower in a loosely sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator for four to seven days.

Fun Fact: The head of cauliflower is white because the plant’s heavy green leaves shield it from sunlight as it grows. Without sunlight, photosynthesis (the natural process in which plants use sunlight to produce chlorophyll, the green pigment in leaves) cannot happen.



Did You Know?

Vegetables from the cabbage family (also known as the Brassicaceae family) are frequently referred to as crucifers or cruciferous vegetables (from the Latin *crux*, which means cross) because they bear flowers with four petals in the shape of a cross. Members of this family include broccoli, cauliflower, kale, cabbage, collard greens, radishes, turnips and parsnips.



Many vegetable members of this family are very similar in taste and characteristics. Romanesco cauliflower (also known as Romanesco broccoli), is a variant form of cauliflower that is closely related to other members of the Brassicaceae family. With a light green shade and extremely unique shape, Romanesco is one of the more interesting-looking members of the vegetable world.



Celeriac (Celery Root)

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Round and knobby, the bulbous celeriac root grows to an average of 3½" in length, is surrounded by rough green stalks, and has tough, furrowed, patchy brown-white skin that is peeled or sliced off before using. When peeled, celeriac's creamy white root resembles the flesh of a turnip and tastes similar to a blend of celery and parsley. It may be used raw to add a crunchy texture to dishes, or cooked as a wintery alternative to potatoes and other root vegetables in soups, stews, casseroles, gratins and other baked dishes.



Selection: Choose specimens with firm, small- to medium-sized roots that are heavy for their size and appear relatively smooth (a few knobs are acceptable). Any attached greens should be bright, robust and firm. Smaller roots tend to be more flavorful than and have a superior texture to their larger counterparts.



Storage: Remove stalks and leaves and store in the refrigerator for up to one week.

Fun Fact: Also known as celery root, knob celery and turnip-rooted celery, celeriac is a member of the celery family that is grown specifically for its large, globe-like, edible root.



Celery

Season: Spring, Fall

Characteristics: Celery's delicious, crunchy texture and sharp, savory flavor make it a favorite for use in the culinary world. An excellent addition to soups and stuffings, raw celery is also commonly added to salads or eaten alone as a healthy snack. Celery leaves can also be used in much the same way as parsley for seasoning, and its seeds are often dried for use in various cuisines. There are two basic types of celery: green and white. White celery tends to be more tender and less bitter than green celery, and is generally only available during the winter months.



Selection: Celery can be purchased as whole stalks with the leaves attached, or as celery hearts which have been trimmed to include just the edible portion of the stalk. Choose celery with straight, crisp, firm stalks that are evenly colored and white to light green in hue. Stalks should be packed tightly together.



Storage: Dry, unwashed celery will remain fresh for approximately one week when refrigerated in a sealed container or loosely sealed plastic bag. When storing, keep away from apples, onions and pears, as celery will absorb their odors.

Fun Fact: Like many vegetables, celery was initially used as a medicinal plant. Celery seeds were packed into pills and ingested to relieve pain as early as 30 A.D. Celery seed was also used as a blood purifier to treat achy joints and arthritis.



Cherries

Season: Spring, Summer

Characteristics: Cherries are most commonly characterized into two main types: the sweet cherry (for eating), and the sour cherry (for cooking). Sweet cherries are heart-shaped and have a sweet, firm flesh which makes them perfect for eating out of hand. Popular varieties include Bing, Lambert, Rainier, Royal Ann and Tartarian. Sour cherries - also known as tart cherries or pie cherries - range from almost sweet to bitter in flavor and are smaller, softer and more globular in shape than their sweeter cousins. Though they are highly perishable and most are too tart to eat raw, sour cherries are ideal for cooking, preserving and use in the manufacture of liquors. Popular varieties include Early Richmond, Montmorency, Morello, and Amarelle.



Selection: Choose shiny, plump cherries that are dark and richly-colored for their variety. It is best to buy them still attached to their stems, which should be fresh, green and flexible.



Storage: Dry, unwashed cherries with their stems attached can be refrigerated in a paper bag or loosely-closed plastic container for several days. Cherries also freeze well.

Fun Fact: In the US, there are more than 1,000 different varieties of cherry tree, almost all of them blossoming over a three-week period in late May and early June. Of those 1,000, only about ten varieties are produced commercially.



Collard Greens

Season: Available year-round

Characteristics: A staple throughout Southern gardens, collards (also known as collard greens) are smooth, broad, dark green leaves with solid, firm veins running through them. Their thick, hearty leaves work well in a variety of dishes, and are most commonly boiled, steamed or sautéed (though thinly sliced leaves can also be eaten raw in salads). Collard greens have a hearty, chewy, fibrous texture and a mild, earthy, somewhat nutty flavor that mellows with long cooking. They pair well with strong flavors such as smoked meats, garlic, chilies and anchovies.

Selection: Collard greens should be fresh and crisp, with thick, strong, deep green leaves that are fan-like in shape.

Storage: Refrigerate unwashed collards in an unsealed plastic bag for up to one week.

Fun Fact: Studies show that collards are most nutritious when simply steamed for five minutes. Unfortunately, nutrients are leached out into the cooking liquid that many people pour down the drain. This cooking liquid or “pot liquor,” as it is called in some Southern states, is full of valuable nutrients. Save it to add to soups or soak it up with a piece of hot cornbread.



Corn

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Each stalk of corn – a member of the grass family – produces from one to three ears of sweet corn, which generally come in three types: yellow, white and bi-color. All three have a sweet flavor and crispy texture, and simply vary in color. Sweet corn is also available in differing levels of sweetness, from regular to super sweet varieties. Corn can be eaten directly from the cob or scraped off for use as a side dish or in various recipes. Though boiling is the traditional method for preparation, corn may also be grilled, steamed or even microwaved.

Selection: Select ears of corn with clean, green, tightly closed husks, tassels that are golden to light brown in color, and even, tightly packed rows of plump kernels. The kernels on yellow or bi-color ears of corn should be bright yellow and vibrantly colored.

Storage: Fresh ears of corn should be refrigerated in their husks in order to slow the process of sugar turning to starch, and are best when consumed within one to two days of purchase.

Fun Fact: Farmers grow corn on every continent except Antarctica.



Cranberries

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Cranberries are small, bright, ruby-red berries which grow on low, creeping evergreen shrubs or vines. Their hard texture and acidic, sharp tartness combine to make them difficult to eat raw – they are nearly always served cooked. Most cranberries are commercially processed into products such as juice, sauce, jam and sweetened dried cranberries, though fresh cranberries may be used by cooks to create cranberry sauce, add flavor to baked goods, or even add tartness to savory dishes such as soups and stews.

Selection: Choose plump, firm, bright red berries. Firmness is a primary indicator of quality in cranberries. If sold by the bag, look for bags that do not have any moisture in them.

Storage: Because of their waxy skins, cranberries keep for much longer than other berries. Fresh, unwashed cranberries can be refrigerated in a sealed container for one to two months and, if frozen, will keep for nearly a year. Before storing, discard any soft, discolored, pitted or shriveled fruits.

Fun Fact: Cranberries are sometimes known as “bounce berries,” because ripe cranberries will bounce due to a small air pocket contained within each berry. In fact, upon arrival at processing factories, each cranberry must successfully bounce over a series of wooden barriers to test its ripeness - those berries that don't pass the bounce test are discarded.





Cucumbers

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: The fresh, light, slightly melony flavor and crisp texture of cucumbers make them a wonderful food for snacking on raw, while their extremely high water content makes them difficult for use in cooking. There are two primary varieties of cucumbers. ‘Slicing’ cucumbers are grown to be eaten fresh and have a sweet flavor and smooth, dark green skin. ‘Pickling’ cucumbers are produced for eventual processing into pickles, and tend to be shorter, thicker, less regularly shaped and have bumpier skin than their ‘slicing’ cousins.



Selection: Select firm, crisp cucumbers which are deep green in color and feel heavy for their size.

Storage: Cucumbers will last approximately one week when stored in a loosely sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator.

Fun Fact: “Cool as a cucumber” is no exaggeration – the inside of a cucumber can be up to 20 degrees cooler than the ambient air, even on summer’s hottest days.



Dandelion Greens

Season: Spring

Characteristics: The bright green leaves of the dandelion plant have a tangy, slightly bitter flavor. The young leaves available in spring and early summer are much more tender and less bitter than those available during late summer and early fall. Dandelion greens can be served raw or cooked similarly to other greens. If they are too bitter to eat, boiling them in several changes of fresh water will help leach out some of the bitterness, as will blanching them. Though the leaves are the most frequently eaten section of the dandelion plant, the flowers and roots may also be consumed.

Caution!
When foraging for dandelion greens, be sure to avoid any areas that may have been contaminated with pesticides, fertilizers or other chemicals. These can include roadsides and commercial properties.

Selection: Look for greens that don’t have any blossoms. Avoid greens that have already bloomed.

Storage: Wash, wrap in a paper towel and place in a plastic bag. Refrigerate for up to one week.

Fun Fact: The use of dandelion greens as a food dates back centuries. In France, the plants came to be known as dent de lion, or “lion’s teeth,” in a reference to the long, jagged leaves and the sunny flowers which rather resemble the manes of lions. With some adjustment to the name, the plant made its way into the English language, as well as the English diet.



Eggplant

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Eggplants have a slightly sweet, mildly smoky flavor and tender, spongy flesh which turns soft after cooking. They are often prepared in place of meats, and are most commonly baked or sautéed. Eggplant is not eaten raw. In the US, eggplants are commonly available in the form of a tear-shaped vegetable with glossy, deep purple skin. However, many varieties exist and are increasingly available at local farmers’ markets – from the slender, elongated Asian eggplants to small, plump ivory-white “white eggs” to round, purple or pink eggplants flecked with irregular white stripes.

Selection: Choose firm, medium-sized eggplants with smooth, glossy, taut skin and a bright, vibrant coloring. The eggplant should feel heavy for its size, and its cap and stem should be bright green.

Storage: Store fresh, whole eggplants in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to one week.

Fun Fact: Thomas Jefferson, who experimented with many varieties of plants in his Virginia garden, is credited with introducing eggplant to North America.





Fava Beans

Season: Spring, Summer

Characteristics: Unshelled fresh fava beans – also known as broad beans, pigeon beans, horse beans, English beans and Windsor beans – look like giant, bumpy string beans. They come in thick, spongy, inedible pods that contain between two and seven beans each, and must be shelled and peeled before eating. The young leaves, shoots and flowers of the fava plant are also edible. The beans themselves are large, flat and bright green in color. They have a buttery, almost creamy texture and a subtle nuttiness combined with a slight bitterness, and are most often served cooked.

Selection: Look for smooth, firm, bright green pods. Small, tender pods are ideal for simple preparations, while fuller, more mature pods are preferable for use in soups and stews.

Storage: Refrigerate unwashed beans in a plastic bag for up to a week.

Fun Fact: Fava beans are one of the oldest plants under cultivation, and were one of man’s earliest foods. There is evidence that they were being cultivated during Neolithic times, were eaten in ancient Greece and Rome, and were a staple food throughout the Dark and Middle Ages.



Fennel

Season: Spring, Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Fennel is composed of a white or pale green bulb topped by closely bunched, celery-like stalks and wispy green leaves, all of which are edible. It lends a light but distinct licorice or anise flavor to dishes, which becomes milder as it is cooked. Fennel has a crisp texture which softens with cooking. It can be eaten raw in salads or on vegetable trays, or cooked and added to savory dishes. There are two main varieties of fennel, though only one is edible – the other is grown for its seeds, which are similar but stronger in flavor and are commonly used as a spice.

Selection: Select large, crisp fennel plants with firm, bright white bulbs that feel heavy for their size. If fronds are attached, they should be bright green and lively.

Storage: Store fresh fennel in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for five to ten days. Before storing, remove the stalks from the bulbs and store separately wrapped in plastic to elongate the life of the vegetable.

Fun Fact: During Medieval times, fennel was one of the nine sacred herbs that were used to treat disease. It was also hung from the rafters to bring good luck and placed in keyholes to drive away ghosts and evil spirits.



Fiddleheads (Ostrich Fern)

Season: Spring

Characteristics: Fiddlehead ferns are the small, bright green, tightly coiled top plumes of the young ostrich fern, harvested before they unfurl into the mature plant. Though nearly all ferns have fiddleheads, those of the ostrich fern are unique in their texture, taste and edibility. They have a grassy, spring-like flavor that is described as a combination of young spinach and asparagus with hints of mushroom, artichoke and okra flavoring and a nutty bite all of their own. Their texture can range from crisp to slightly chewy, depending on their method of preparation. Fiddleheads can be used similarly to any firm green vegetable (i.e. broccoli), and are most commonly prepared by steaming, boiling or sautéing.

Selection: Select tightly coiled fiddleheads with only an inch or two of stem beyond the coil.

Storage: Place in a tightly sealed plastic container and refrigerate for one to three days.

Fun Fact: Fiddleheads may harbor microbes and should not be served raw. **Both the Centers for Disease Control and Health Canada advise that fresh fiddleheads must be properly cooked before being consumed.** It is recommended that fiddleheads are cooked for at least 10 minutes prior to consumption.



Caution!
Never forage without an experienced guide. Many other ferns look very similar in appearance to the Ostrich Fern Fiddlehead but are toxic when consumed.



Garlic

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Garlic is a lovely, fragrant, aromatic root vegetable used in cuisines throughout the world. Each bulb is composed of 4 – 60 cloves, which are creamy white in color and enclosed in a light, paper-like covering which also surrounds the entire bulb. Garlic has a spicy, pungent, succulent flavor which becomes more delicate as it is cooked. As a general rule, the smaller the bulb, the stronger the flavor. The bold, heavy flavor of garlic lends itself well to a variety of dishes, including pastas, pizzas, stir-fries, sautéés and casseroles.



Selection: Select garlic heads that are plump, firm and round with clear, papery skins. Avoid those with dark, powdery patches under the skin, since this commonly-found mold will eventually spoil the flesh of the garlic.



Storage: Store whole bulbs for one to three months in a cool, dry place. Once the bulb is broken open the storage life is greatly reduced and it should be used quickly – refrigerate peeled cloves in a sealed container for several days.

Fun Fact: There is some confusion in food stores between large-growing varieties of garlic and the vegetable known as Elephant garlic. Though it looks much like a very large garlic bulb, elephant garlic is actually more closely related the leek than the typical garlic bulb and has a much milder taste. It has a mild, creamy, light garlic flavor and the cloves are very large in comparison with those of ordinary garlic.



Did You Know?

Both green garlic and garlic scapes are often available at spring and early summer farmers markets, and can add a delicate, fresh flavor to many spring dishes.

Green garlic is simply immature garlic, and resembles an overgrown scallion or green onion in appearance. Its creamy white head is streaked with green and pink, and often the entire head is used whole.



Garlic scapes (also called garlic shoots) are the curled flower stalks of hardneck garlic varieties. They have the mildest flavor of all garlic products.



Grapes

Season: Fall

Characteristics: Commercially cultivated grapes can usually be classified as either table or wine grapes, and vary in color from crimson to black, dark blue, yellow, green, orange and pink. The grape's inner pulp is translucent and usually contains a few seeds, although several varieties of seedless grapes exist. Table grapes are a large, thin-skinned, generally seedless fruit with a sweet taste and crisp texture that makes them popular for snacking. They are most often washed and eaten directly out of hand, but are also used to make jams, jellies, juices and other confectionery treats. Wine grapes are cultivated for use in winemaking, and tend to be smaller, seeded, thick-skinned and very sweet in flavor. They are generally not available through grocery stores or farmers' markets.



Selection: Select clusters of plump, fragrant, richly colored grapes which are securely attached to firm, bright green stems.



Storage: Dry, unwashed grapes can be refrigerated in a loosely sealed plastic bag for at least a week.

Fun Fact: Concord grapes are one of few edible fruit species native to North America. These sweet, deeply colored grapes are best known for producing grape juice, jelly and wine, but have a myriad of other uses. They're available in the fall, but are most abundant during the month of October. Known as "slip-skins," they don't even need to be peeled — just wash, rinse and pinch. The skin slips right off, leaving you with a delicious and healthy snack.



Green Beans

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Also referred to as string beans, green beans are a vegetable with small inner beans and long, edible pods that come to a point on each end. They have a fresh, earthy taste and crisp, crunchy texture which is retained even through cooking. They are most often cooked, though they are also excellent eaten raw or added to a salad. Common varieties include green beans, pole beans, haricot verts, wax beans, Romano beans and snap beans.

Selection: Select green beans which are crisp, firm, smooth-skinned and brightly colored. Thinner varieties tend to be sweeter and more tender, so look for beans which are about as thick as a pencil.

Storage: Refrigerate fresh, unwashed green beans in a loosely sealed plastic bag for up to a week.

Fun Fact: Green beans were first grown in Latin America as many as 8,000 years ago. They used to have a very thick 'string' running along the outer curve of the pod, which led to their nickname of 'string beans.' In 1894, scientists found a way to grow the beans without the string. Today, nearly all green beans are grown without thick strings, though heirloom varieties may still have this fibrous 'string' running down their sides.



Green Onions

Season: Spring

Characteristics: Green onions – also known as spring onions – are young onion shoots, harvested in the spring before they have the chance to fully develop into their large, bulbous counterparts. Their miniature white bulb is attached to long green stalks, and both are edible. Scallions are an even younger variety of green onions and do not have a bulb at all. Green onions differ greatly in taste and texture from mature onions, with a sweet, mild flavor and tender texture. They can be eaten raw, sautéed, baked, blanched or grilled, and also serve as an excellent garnish.

Selection: Choose green onions with crisp, dark green tops and a firm white base. They should be straight along the entire length of the vegetable and uniform in size.

Storage: Remove any rubber bands or damaged leaves, wrap in a plastic bag and refrigerate for five to seven days. Be sure to store green onions away from odor-sensitive foods such as corn, figs, grapes, mushrooms or rhubarb, as onions produce odors which will be absorbed by such items.

Fun Fact: Onions are credited with giving the city of Chicago its name. The Chippewa Indians found these "she-gau-ga-winshe" growing at the site of the modern day city.



Honeydew

Season: Summer

Characteristics: The "honeydew" as we generally think of it is actually known as the White Antibes melon – a slightly oval melon distinguished by a smooth, creamy white or pale yellow-green rind and extremely sweet, pale green flesh. This thick, juicy flesh is texturally similar to that of cantaloupe, though most honeydew is much sweeter in flavor than its orange cousin. Honeydew is generally consumed as a raw fruit, and is a staple component of fruit salads throughout America. Honeydew can also be pureed and made into a cold soup or used in smoothies.

Selection: Select melons that feel heavy for their size and have a firm, creamy white to yellow-green rind that is slightly waxy to the touch. When pressed with the thumb, the stem end of the honeydew should give slightly.

Storage: Store uncut melons at room temperature until ripe. Perfectly ripe honeydews will have an almost indistinguishable wrinkling on their surface that can only be detected by touch. Cut honeydew should be placed in a tightly sealed container and refrigerated for up to three days.

Fun Fact: Though the flesh of a honeydew melon is typically green, it can also be orange in color. This specific type of honeydew is often referred to as the "temptation melon" and is actually a hybrid between a honeydew melon and a cantaloupe.





Kale

Season: Spring, Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Kale comes in many colors, including red, green and purple. It tends to be slightly bitter and earthy in flavor, with a taste similar to cabbage. Kale is most commonly consumed cooked, though very young leaves are more tender and may be used raw in salads. Cooked kale is generally sautéed, stir fried, steamed, grilled, fried, baked or added to soups. When cooking, be aware that the woody, fibrous stems will take more time to cook than the leaves. Many chefs trim and discard the largest stems to ensure even cooking.



Selection: Select kale with crisp, firm, deeply colored leaves and thin, moist stems. Smaller kale leaves will be more tender and have a milder flavor than larger ones and are ideal for raw consumption, while bigger leaves are often preferable for use in soups and stews.



Storage: Place dry, unwashed kale leaves in a loosely sealed plastic container in the refrigerator for up to one week.

Fun Fact: Kale is an extraordinarily hardy cool-season vegetable, suited to gardening in almost any part of the world. It is one of the few greens that is more abundant and flavorful during the coldest months of the year. Kale takes well to frost, and grows sweeter in taste after it has been frozen or exposed to a frost.



Kohlrabi

Season: Spring, Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Kohlrabi looks like a cross between cabbage and turnips, with a long stalk and large leaves protruding from a spherical base. Bulbs may be available in purple, green or white, though the flesh of the bulb is always white. Kohlrabi can be eaten raw or cooked and is generally peeled before eating. It has a crisp texture and a mild, sweet taste which has been likened to a cross between cabbage, radishes, cucumbers and water chestnuts. When cooked, kohlrabi assumes a taste and texture similar to those of broccoli stems or celery roots, though milder and sweeter. Kohlrabi's thick, leafy greens may also be cooked and eaten in a similar fashion to collard greens or kale, and have a flavor that is much milder and less bitter than most greens.



Selection: Look for bulbs with small, smooth, evenly-colored stems and firm, dark green, fresh-looking leaves. Small- to medium-sized bulbs will yield the best texture and flavor.



Storage: Dry, unwashed *kohlrabi* will keep for one to two weeks when refrigerated in a loosely sealed plastic bag. It is best to remove the leaves and upper stems if you are planning on storing it for more than a few days.

Fun Fact: The name kohlrabi comes from the German word *kohl* meaning cabbage and *rabi* meaning turnip. Though its name references relation to the turnip, which is a root vegetable, kohlrabi is not actually a root vegetable—rather, it is a fleshy bulbous stem which sits just above the ground as it grows.



Leeks

Season: Spring, Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Leeks are relatives of onions, shallots and garlics, and are characterized by a large white tubular root topped by a fan of wide, flat, dark green leaves. They are used in much the same way as onions, though they have a sweeter, subtler, more delicate flavor than their bulbous cousins. Leeks are often used for seasoning but can also be served as a vegetable on their own. They are most commonly baked, boiled or sautéed, and raw, thinly-sliced leeks can also make excellent additions to salads. Leeks should be cooked for a shorter amount of time than onions as they brown relatively quickly.



Selection: Choose tall, straight, firm leeks with long white necks and crisp, healthy, dark green leaves extending at least 2-3" from the root end. Thin- and medium-sized leeks have a milder flavor and are more tender than larger specimens.



Storage: Refrigerate leeks in a loosely wrapped plastic bag for one to two weeks.

Fun Fact: Known as 'the king of soup onions,' the leek is a key ingredient in many famous soups. These include creamy *vichyssoise* (a leek and potato soup invented in the USA by a French chef at New York's Ritz Carlton) and the Scottish *cock-a-leekie* soup.



Lettuce

Season: Spring, Summer, Fall

Characteristics: There are six general varieties of lettuce, based upon head formation and leaf structure: Butterhead, Crisphead, Looseleaf, Romaine, Summer Crisp and Chinese. Most have relatively mild flavors and vary mainly in appearance, color and texture. Lettuce is generally eaten raw in salads or as a crunchy topping for sandwiches, hamburgers, tacos and other dishes, though certain global cuisines call for the addition of cooked lettuce. Other leafy greens, such as arugula, curly endive, frisee, chicory, mizuna and watercress, are not technically lettuce, though they are often used interchangeably with lettuce in salads. They tend to be more intensely-flavored than head and looseleaf lettuces.

Selection: Look for crisp, robustly-colored leaves and clean, fresh-looking cut ends. If you are buying head lettuce, select specimens which are compact and firm.

Storage: Wrap lettuce in a plastic bag or airtight container and store in the refrigerator. Iceberg lettuce can be stored the longest and generally keeps for up to three weeks. Butterhead and looseleaf lettuces are the most perishable, and will generally only keep for a few days.

Fun Fact: Lettuces have been cultivated for thousands of years and were popular among the Romans, who are rumored to have introduced them to Britain.

Did you know?
In general, leafy lettuces with a darker green or red color are more nutrient-rich than lighter, crispier, more mild-flavored lettuces.



Mushrooms

Season: Cultivated – available year-round; Wild – Spring, Fall

Characteristics: With their spongy, porous, meaty flesh, mushrooms are known as the meat of the vegetable world. They vary greatly in taste depending on variety, but all have a distinctive flavor that is deep, earthy and woody. Mushrooms can be eaten raw or cooked, and are most commonly sautéed, baked, grilled, roasted or pan-fried. Their stems can be trimmed or eliminated completely, but are also acceptable for consumption along with the caps. Mushrooms fall into two general categories: cultivated and wild. Common varieties of cultivated mushrooms include white buttons, shiitakes, oysters and enokis. Common varieties of wild mushrooms include porcinis, chanterelles, puffballs, matsutakes, morels and lobster mushrooms.

Selection: Select mushrooms that are smooth in appearance and have large, firm, dry caps. They should look fresh and smell good. If the veils on the bottom are closed, the flavor will be mild; if they are open, the mushroom will have a much richer flavor.

Storage: Blot excess moisture from unwashed mushrooms and place them in a paper bag (never plastic) in the refrigerator. When stored properly, wild mushrooms should last for a few days, while cultivated varieties should keep for one to two weeks.



Caution!

There are no simple rules that can reliably tell you which mushrooms are poisonous and which are edible. A number of mushroom species closely resemble certain edible species but are actually highly poisonous or even fatal.

Never pick or eat wild mushrooms unless a trained expert collector has identified them.

Beginners should not rely solely on their own identifications based on any field guide – especially not on those that only provide photographs and brief descriptions.

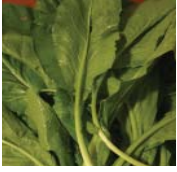


Mustard Greens

Season: Spring, Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Mustard greens are the leaves of the mustard plant. Their oval-shaped leaves can have either a crumpled or flat texture, and may have toothed, scalloped, frilled or lacy edges. In addition to providing wonderfully nutritious greens, this plant also produces the acrid-tasting brown seeds that are used to make Dijon mustard.

Mustard greens are generally emerald green in color, though dark red or purple varieties are also available. They add a pungent, peppery flavor to recipes in which they are featured, and can be eaten raw or cooked. Young mustard leaves are mild-flavored and can be eaten raw in salads, while older greens are tougher and much sharper in taste, and are more commonly prepared cooked.



Selection: Select mustard greens which are fresh and crisp and have a bright, lively green color.

Storage: Store unwashed mustard greens in a plastic bag with air removed in the refrigerator for three to four days.

Fun Fact: Mizuna is an Asian variety of mustard greens with spiky, dark green leaves that have a surprisingly delicate texture and delightfully peppery, even spicy, kick.



Nectarines

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Nectarines are virtually identical to peaches – they simply have a recessive gene which makes them smooth and fuzzless. They can range in color from creamy yellow to rich orange, and nearly always have a red blush on the outside. The nectarine is available in both white-flesh and yellow-flesh varieties, and tends to be juicy, sweet and extremely flavorful. Nectarines are generally eaten raw, though they can also be poached, baked, grilled or pureed. Some cooks complain, however, that cooking spoils their delicate texture and flavor.

Selection: Choose plump nectarines with smooth skin that is a rich deep yellow or creamy white in color. The fruit should give off a noticeably sweet smell and be firm, with a little give, when pressed gently.

Storage: Unripe nectarines can be left at room temperature for several days to ripen. Once ripened, store nectarines in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for five to seven days.

Fun Fact: Nectarines are available in both freestone and clingstone varieties. Freestone fruits have a pit which is easily removed and will readily fall out when the fruit is cut in half, while the pits of clingstone fruits are harder to dislodge since the flesh of the fruit clings to the pit.



Okra

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Okra is a green, fuzzy, deeply ridged pod that contains round, white, edible seeds. Though it can be eaten raw, it is most often enjoyed cooked. Okra retains a crunchy texture when cooked quickly and becomes increasingly tender the longer it is cooked. The inside of okra is mucilaginous, resulting in a characteristic sliminess when the seed pods are cut and cooked. Some people prefer to minimize this sliminess by cooking quickly and keeping pods intact, while others take advantage of the slime's natural thickening properties in hearty stews such as gumbo.

Selection: Choose crisp, smooth, bright green pods that are one to four inches in length and are covered in a soft, dewy fuzz.

Storage: Store okra in a plastic bag in the warmest part of the refrigerator for two to three days.

Fun Fact: Avoid cooking okra in pans made of iron, copper or brass – doing so creates a chemical reaction that will turn the pods black.





Onions

Season: Spring, Summer

Characteristics: Whether raw or cooked, onions have an adaptability that makes them great for use in any dish. Depending on the variety, onions can be sharp and spicy, tangy and pungent, or mild and sweet. There are three main varieties of onions – yellow, white and red – though varieties such as pearl, Spanish and sweet onions are also popular. Yellow onions are characterized by a full flavor, light brown skin and greenish-white to pale yellow flesh. White onions, with their papery white outer skin and white flesh, are a bit milder than their yellow counterparts. Red onions have a light flavor and shiny, papery, purple-red skins with white flesh.



Selection: Look for clean, firm, round onions with dry, papery outer skins and no opening at the neck.

Storage: Onions are an ideal storage vegetable and can last up to several months if stored properly in a cool, dark place away from moisture. They also store well in the refrigerator, but their flavor can easily penetrate that of other foods so be sure to store onions separately.



Fun Fact: Onions can help soothe insect bites. To take advantage of the anti-inflammatory properties in their enzymes, try rubbing a half-onion onto an insect bite to help reduce swelling, itching and pain.



Did you know?

Ever wonder what it is about onions that can make you cry while chopping them?

It's the sulfuric compounds!

Next time you see someone's eyes watering while cutting an onion, tell them to chill the onion and cut into the root portion last next time they start chopping.

Chilled onions thwart off the effects of sulfuric compounds that are likely responsible for causing your tears.



Parsnips

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Parsnips are succulent root vegetables that resemble large, fat, ivory-colored carrots. When cooked, they have a buttery, sweet, distinctly nutty flavor that is enhanced by apples, orange zest and spices such as cinnamon, ginger and nutmeg. Parsnips' starchy texture when fully cooked lends well to soups, stews and roasted vegetable medleys. After cooking, they are also often mashed or pureed. Parsnips are generally not eaten raw



Selection: Pick firm, crisp, medium-size vegetables with relatively smooth, evenly colored skin. Smaller parsnips are generally sweeter, creamier and more tender than their larger counterparts.

Storage: Parsnips can be refrigerated in a loosely wrapped plastic bag for one to two weeks. Remove any attached greens before storing.



Fun Fact: Parsnips actually taste better after the first frost of the season, since the frost converts their starches to sugar.



Peaches

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Peaches are a round stone fruit with a fuzzy, pinkish-red skin, a juicy flesh that ranges from white to yellow to orange in color, and a large, inedible pit in the middle. They have a sweet, slightly tart taste and are most frequently eaten raw, though they are also often used in desserts or canned. There are two main types of peaches: clingstone and freestone. Clingstone peaches have flesh that is firmly attached to the pit, while the pit of freestone peaches is much easier to remove.



Selection: Select peaches with a rich, even color, a well-defined crease and a slight give to the flesh. Ripe fruits should have a fragrant, sweet aroma.



Storage: Store peaches at room temperature out of direct sunlight until ripened. Ripe peaches should be refrigerated and consumed within a week.

Fun Fact: Peaches and nectarines are so similar that there is only one gene that separates the two to make them distinct. The nectarine simply has one recessive gene: the one with the fuzz. Many experts consider it possible that peaches are a cross between nectarines and almonds.



Pears

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Pears can range in texture from very soft, creamy and juicy to firm and crisp. They have a fine, white, granular flesh and a core containing small, inedible seeds. Their skin ranges in color from bronze to gold, green and yellow. Some varieties of pears require cooking, while others are best eaten raw.



Selection: Choose bright, firm-textured fruits that give slightly to pressure when squeezed.

Storage: Pears will continue to ripen at room temperature. For unripe pears, store at room temperature until ripened, checking daily. Refrigerate ripe pears for three to five days.



Fun Fact: Pears are native to Asia and Europe. The first pear tree was planted in the North America in 1620 in the Massachusetts Bay colony.



Peas

Season: Spring, Summer

Characteristics: There are many species of peas, some of which can be eaten whole and some in which only the seeds of a pod are consumed. Green peas have small pods that contain a single row of starchy, sweet, edible round peas, which are removed from the pod before consumption. Snow peas are an edible young flat pod with immature peas inside, and are eaten whole. Sugar snap peas have puffy, sweet, crunchy pods that are also consumed whole. All peas can be eaten raw, and are also often boiled, steamed, stir fried or braised just until tender.



Selection: Choose medium-sized bright green pods that are crisply textured and full with seeds.

Storage: Peas are highly perishable and should be eaten within a few days, while others can be refrigerated in a plastic bag for up to a week.



Fun Fact: Pea greens - the tender young vines of pea plants - can be seen piled up in tangled bunches at farmers' markets in the spring and early summer. Their delicate flavor makes them delicious simply cooked or served raw.

Did you know?

It is best to eat fresh peas immediately. Similarly to corn, the sugar in fresh peas quickly converts to starch, so it's important that they be prepared and eaten as soon as possible after picking to achieve optimal taste and freshness.



Peppers (Bell)

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Sweet bell peppers have a thick flesh with smooth, waxy skin and a crunchy texture. They are more mild-flavored than their chili pepper counterparts, and are most commonly found with green, yellow, orange or red skins. All bell peppers are of the same species, though their flavor ranges greatly based on maturity – immature green peppers are the most bitter in flavor and mature red peppers the sweetest, while yellow and orange peppers fall in between.



Selection: Pick firm, smooth, heavy-feeling peppers that have shiny, brightly-colored skin and a firm green calyx (stem) attached.

Storage: Bell peppers can be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for about a week. Green peppers may generally be stored for longer.



Fun Fact: According to the USDA, a sweet red bell pepper contains three times as much Vitamin C by weight as a citrus fruit such as an orange.



Peppers (Chili)

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Chili peppers add a bright, lively flavor to cuisines across the globe. They can vary in size and flavor from large, mild peppers to tiny, astoundingly hot varieties. Common varieties include Anaheim, Banana, Cubanelle, Habañero, Jalapeño, Pasilla and Poblano. They are most often eaten cooked but can also be served raw, often in salsas or dips.



Selection: Choose firm, shiny, brilliantly colored peppers. Some varieties will have smooth skin when ripe, while others are wrinkled even in their prime. Dry lines on the skin of spicy peppers generally indicate a hotter pepper.

Storage: Store fresh chili peppers in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for one to three weeks, depending on the variety. Fresh chili peppers can also be dried and stored for use at a later date. Store dried chili peppers in an airtight container in a cool, dry place for up to two years.



Fun Fact: The substance which makes the chili hot is a volatile oil called capsaicin. It differs not only from one type of chili to another, but also from plant to plant depending upon growing conditions. The more the plant has to struggle to survive in terms of light, water and soil, the more capsaicin will be produced and the spicier it will be.



Persimmon

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Persimmon fruits resemble large orange tomatoes and can vary in color from light yellow-orange to dark orange-red. They have a sweet, jellylike flesh with spicy undertones, and can be eaten fresh, dried, raw or cooked. Persimmons have a high tannin content which makes the unripe fruit extremely astringent and bitter, meaning they must be fully ripened before consumption.



Selection: Select medium- to large-sized persimmons that are smooth, plump, glossy and brightly colored. The green cap (called the calyx) should still be attached and fresh in appearance.

Storage: Store unripe persimmons in a plastic bag at room temperature to ripen. Once ripe, they are best eaten immediately but may be refrigerated for up to three days.



Fun Fact: Persimmons were first grown in Japan and China, though they are now produced all over the world where the climate is warm enough. They were introduced to the US in 1855 by Commodore Matthew Perry, who brought the plants to Washington, DC from Japan.



Plums

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Plums come in a wide variety of colors, sizes, shapes and flavors. The fruit has a sweet, juicy, mildly tart flesh that ranges from creamy yellow to crimson, light blue and light green in color. The smooth skin of the plum can vary from blue-black to purple, red, green or yellow in color, and should have a waxy, dusty-white protective coating called a bloom that indicates freshness.

Selection: Select plump, firm plums that are rich in color with a slight whitish bloom on the outside. Ripe plums will yield to gentle pressure and should be slightly soft at the stem and tip.

Storage: Store unripe plums in a loosely closed paper bag at room temperature until ripened. Once ripe, transfer to the refrigerator and store up to three days.

Fun Fact: Plums are juiciest when eaten at room temperature.



Potatoes

Season: Spring, Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Potatoes are rounded, starchy tubers that can vary widely in size and are nearly always served cooked. They have a moist, buttery flesh that can range in color from creamy white to russet and indigo. Any potatoes that are harvested before they develop their full amount of starch are considered new potatoes (also known as fingerlings). New potatoes are smaller, sweeter and firmer than mature potatoes, and are rarely peeled.

Selection: Select firm, smooth potatoes with no cuts, bruises, mold, sprouting or greenish discoloration.

Storage: Store mature potatoes in a dark, dry, well-ventilated location for up to a month. New potatoes should be stored the same way but will only last for a week or two. Never refrigerate potatoes.

Fun Fact: Between 7,000 and 10,000 years ago, local people in South America's Andes Mountains bred a poisonous plant into edible potatoes. Thousands of kinds of potatoes still grow in the Andes, and different spots on the mountain - whether high or low, sunny or shady - have specific potatoes suited to that location.



Pumpkins

Season: Fall

Characteristics: Pumpkins are large, bright yellow or orange squashes with deep orange flesh and smooth, lightly ribbed rinds. They vary greatly in shape, size and color, and certain varieties have been specially developed for purposes such as pie-making and seed roasting. Most parts of the pumpkin are edible, including the shell, seeds, leaves and flowers. They have a sweet, slightly honeyed flavor that is popular in desserts, though often used in savory dishes as well. Ripe pumpkin can be boiled, baked, steamed or roasted, and is rarely eaten raw.

Selection: Choose bright, firm pumpkins that are heavy for their size and have an attached stem that is fully intact.

Storage: Whole pumpkins can be stored for one to two months in a cool, dry, dark location. Once cut, pumpkin can be refrigerated in a loosely sealed plastic bag for about a week.

Fun Fact: Pumpkins have been grown in North America for over 5,000 years. They are native to Central America and Mexico, though they are now produced on every continent except Antarctica.





Radishes

Season: Spring, Summer

Characteristics: Radishes are a root vegetable with a crisp texture and pungent, peppery-hot flavor that varies from mild to very strong depending on age and type. Radishes come in a wide range of sizes, shapes and colors. They are most frequently eaten raw but can also be used in cooked dishes. The most commonly eaten portion of the radish is its root, although the entire plant is edible. The tops can be consumed as a leaf vegetable, and the seeds are sometimes used as a crunchy, spicy addition to salads.

Selection: Pick radishes that have firm, crisp, brightly colored bulbs and fresh, lively green leaves.

Storage: Refrigerate radishes for up to two weeks in a loosely sealed plastic bag, taking care to remove the leafy tops before storing. Some larger varieties can last for over a month when stored this way.

Fun Fact: Citizens of Oaxaca, Mexico celebrate the radish in a festival called *La Noche de Rábanos* (Night of the Radishes), which is held each year on December 23rd. The festival is a unique art show in which large radishes are carved into elaborate sculptures and then displayed in the town square, where they are viewed by thousands of visitors.



Ramps

Season: Spring

Characteristics: Ramps, also called wild leeks, are wild onions with a scallion-like bulb, a hairy root, and broad, flat, dark green leaves. The entire plant is edible, with a flavor and odor comparable to a pungent mix of garlic and onion. The green tops are generally milder in flavor than the white bulbs. Ramps can be used raw or cooked in any recipe that calls for leeks or scallions, and can also be cooked similarly to leeks and other dark green leafy vegetables.

Selection: Choose plants of similar size with firm, unblemished white bulbs and bright, fresh leaves.

Storage: Wrap ramps loosely in a plastic bag and store in the refrigerator for one to two weeks.

Fun Fact: As one of the first plants to emerge in the spring, ramps were traditionally consumed as the season's first greens. They were considered a tonic because they provided necessary vitamins and minerals following long winter months without access to fresh fruits and vegetables.



Raspberries

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Raspberries are soft fruits with a taste that varies from very sweet to quite tart depending on the variety. They are defined by their hollow center and slightly dry, seedy texture. While the most common type of raspberry is red-pink in color, raspberries actually come in a range of colors including black, purple, orange, yellow and white.

Selection: Look for firm, plump berries with a bright, rich, even coloring. The berries should be dry with no leakage at the bottom of the container.

Storage: Raspberries are one of the most perishable fruits and should be eaten as soon as possible after purchase. To store, refrigerate fresh raspberries in an airtight container for two to three days. Remove any rotten or mushy berries before storing.

Fun Fact: Raspberries are known as "aggregate fruits" since they are made up of many tiny individual sections called drupelets. Each raspberry consists of about 100 tiny drupelets, which each contain a juicy pulp and a single central seed. These drupelets are arranged in a circular fashion around a hollow central cavity.





Rhubarb

Season: Spring

Characteristics: Rhubarb is a celery-like vegetable with long, edible, red and green stalks and highly poisonous leaves and roots. It is too tart to be eaten raw and is most commonly cooked with generous amounts of sugar to balance its tartness. Rhubarb is also known as pieplant due to its traditional use as a filling for sweet dishes such as pies and crisps, but its flavor can also lend a tart fruitiness to savory dishes.

Selection: Choose firm, crisp, medium-sized stalks with taut, shiny skin and a bright, vivid color.

Storage: Remove leaves and refrigerate in a plastic bag for one to two weeks.

Fun Fact: In addition to growing in gardens, rhubarb is also commonly grown year-round in “hothouses.” Hothouse rhubarb is usually a brighter red in color and is sweeter than rhubarb cultivated in gardens or fields.



Caution!
Rhubarb leaves contain harmful toxins that are poisonous to humans. It is essential to handle the plants with care and to trim and discard all attached leaves.



Rutabaga

Season: Spring, Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Rutabagas are bulbous yellow root vegetables that originated as a cross between cabbage and turnips. They resemble oversized turnips, though they are sweeter and less peppery in flavor and have a lower water content. Rutabagas are generally cooked until soft, and are excellent for roasting, mashing and adding to soups or stews. They must be peeled before cooking. The leafy greens of the rutabaga plant are also edible, and are typically eaten like spinach.

Selection: Pick firm, smooth-skinned, evenly colored rutabagas that feel heavy for their size. If greens are still attached, they should be fresh, crisp and bright in color.

Storage: Rutabagas can be refrigerated in a plastic bag for two to three weeks. Remove any attached greens before storing.

Fun Fact: The rutabaga resulted from a chance hybridization, centuries ago, between cabbage and turnips. The plant is considered by botanists to be in the cabbage family.



Spinach

Season: Spring, Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Spinach is a versatile leafy vegetable with tender, crispy, dark green leaves that are a favorite ingredient of chefs throughout the world. Spinach has a deep, earthy flavor that is similar to lettuce, but with more minerality. Larger, tougher spinach leaves are frequently served cooked, while younger leaves and “baby spinach” are generally served in salads or on sandwiches.

Selection: Look for spinach bunches that have fresh, crisp, tender leaves that are dark green in color.

Storage: Store spinach in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Fun Fact: Despite its numerous health benefits, spinach is one of the most heavily pesticide-contaminated produce products. To minimize your exposure to these chemicals, wash leaves thoroughly before consuming or purchase organically-grown spinach.





Squash (Summer)

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Summer squash is a group of squashes that are harvested when immature, while the rind is still tender and edible. Summer squashes have a mild flavor and can be eaten raw or cooked, though their high water content means they do not stand up well to prolonged baking. Summer squashes come in many different shapes and colors but all have similar texture and flavor and are often used interchangeably in recipes. Common varieties include Yellow Crooknecks, Pattypan and Zucchini.



Selection: Select small- to medium-sized squash with firm flesh and clear, shiny, taut skin.

Storage: Squash can be refrigerated in a loosely sealed plastic bag for up to a week.

Fun Fact: Many of the nutrients in summer squash are found in the peel, so it is important to eat these vegetables with the skin on for maximum nutrient intake.



Squash (Winter)

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Winter squashes are harvested and eaten when the squash fruit has matured, allowing the flesh to thicken and shells to harden into a tough rind. There are many varieties of winter squashes, all of which tend to be coarse and unusually shaped. Most have yellow or orange flesh that is mildly sweet in flavor and finely grained in texture. Winter squashes are almost always cooked before eating, and tend to be interchangeable when cooking. Common varieties include Butternut, Acorn, Hubbard, Turban and Kabocha.



Selection: Select firm squashes that are heavy for their size and have a dull – not glossy – rind.

Storage: Whole winter squashes can be stored in a cool, dark location for anywhere between one and six months, depending on freshness and variety. Cut winter squash can be sealed in plastic wrap and refrigerated for several days.

Fun Fact: Seeds from winter squash make a great snack food, just like pumpkin seeds. If you scoop the pulp and seeds from inside the squash and separate out the seeds, you can place them in a single layer on a cookie sheet, season them with a little salt and olive oil, and lightly roast them at 160-170°F in the oven for 15-20 minutes for a delicious and healthy snack.



Strawberries

Season: Spring, Summer

Characteristics: Strawberries are plump, sweet, bright red fruits with tiny edible seeds dotting their exterior and a small, green leafy cap and stem on top. They have a juicy texture and can range in taste from sweet to tart depending on the variety. Typically, the smaller the berry, the greater the intensity of the flavor. Strawberries are most often eaten fresh, though they are also used in cooked dishes and preserves.



Selection: Choose dry, plump, bright red berries with a natural sheen and fresh green caps that are still attached.

Storage: Remove any rotten or damaged berries and refrigerate in a sealed plastic container for three to four days.

Fun Fact: The cultivated strawberries we enjoy today were developed in the 19th century from small, scarlet, wild strawberries from Virginia. Modern strawberries have become the most cultivated berry in the country. They are grown in every state and are available at most farmers' markets, if only for a brief time in colder climates.





Sweet Potatoes

Season: Spring, Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Sweet potatoes are large, starchy, tuberous roots that require cooking before eating. They have a long, tapered shape that resembles regular potatoes (but with a pointy end) and a smooth outer skin whose color ranges between purple, red, brown and beige. Their flesh has a distinctive sugary and spicy flavor and ranges in color from orange to yellow, beige and purple. The green leaves of the sweet potato plant are also edible.



Selection: Select dry, firm, unblemished sweet potatoes that have a smooth, intact skin and are small to medium in size.

Storage: Store sweet potatoes in a dark, dry location for up to a month. Do not refrigerate, as it negatively affects their flavor.



Fun Fact: The USDA requires that sweet potatoes sold under the label “yam” must always be accompanied by the words “sweet potato” to distinguish them from a true yam.



Did you know?

Be sure not to confuse sweet potatoes with yams – the two starchy root vegetables are extremely different in taste, appearance and use.

Many “yams” that are commonly sold in the US are actually a Louisiana variety of sweet potato with a moist texture and orange flesh.

True yams are native to Africa and Asia and have a much thicker skin and a starchier, white flesh – they can grow several feet in length and up to 120 pounds in weight!



Swiss Chard

Season: Available year-round

Characteristics: Swiss chard, also known as chard, is a leafy green vegetable with large, shiny, ribbed leaves and stems that range across all colors of the rainbow, depending on the variety. The dark green ruffled leaves are similar to spinach but chewier, and are generally cooked like other greens. Chard’s thick stems can be cooked like celery or asparagus. Chard has a delicate, faintly bitter taste that is slightly stronger and more robust than spinach.



Selection: Select bunches of chard that have tall, firm, dark green leaves and crisp, vividly colored stems.

Storage: Refrigerate chard in a loosely sealed plastic bag for three to five days.



Fun Fact: Swiss chard - also known as “silverbeet” - is actually a beet without the bulbous root, and with much larger leaves and stems. It is also referred to as crab beet, seakale beet and spinach beet.



Tomatillos

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: The tomatillo (toe-ma-tea-oh) is of Mexican origin. It now grows everywhere in the Western Hemisphere and is common in Texas gardens, though it can also be cultivated well in the gardens of Virginia. This husked tomato-like plant produces an edible fruit enclosed in a thick husk. The tomatillo's husk will range from green to brown depending on freshness, and the fruit is a yellowish-green when ripe. Tomatillos are most often used raw in salsas, but are also used to add flavor to cooked dishes.

Selection: The condition of a tomatillo's husk is a good indication of the freshness of the fruit. The husk should be light brown and fresh looking, not shriveled and dried. The fruit inside should be firm and free of defects.

Storage: Fresh tomatillos will keep in the refrigerator for about two weeks. If longer storage is desired, remove husks and place ripe fruit in a sealed plastic bag in refrigerator.

Fun Fact: The tomatillo is a member of the tomato family and is similar in appearance to a green tomato except that it grows surrounded by a thin husk that must be peeled prior to using the fruit. The tomatillo is native to Mexico where it is known as tomate verde and tomate de fresadilla.



Tomatoes

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: Tomatoes are one of the most common garden fruits in the US and form a staple of the American diet. They come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and can range in flavor from sweet and succulent to acidic and bitter. Though nearly all commercial tomatoes are red in color, many heirloom varieties produce fruits that range from green to yellow, orange, pink, black, brown, ivory, white and purple. Tomatoes can be consumed raw or used as an ingredient in a wide variety of dishes, sauces and beverages.

Selection: Choose firm, brightly colored tomatoes that give slightly when squeezed. Many heirloom variety tomatoes will have strange shapes and colors – try not to overlook these as they can bring wonderful and exciting new tastes and textures to your table.

Storage: Store ripe tomatoes out of the sun at room temperature for several days. Do not refrigerate.

Fun Fact: Some very poisonous members of the tomato's plant family may well have deterred our ancestors from taking to tomatoes. Indeed, the leaves of tomatoes are actually toxic and, if eaten, can result in very bad stomachaches.



Turnips

Season: Fall, Winter

Characteristics: Turnips are a bulbous edible root with a half-white, half-purple exterior and white flesh. They have a pleasant, slightly peppery flavor, though older specimens can develop a strong, hot, bitter taste. Turnips are most often eaten cooked, though "baby" turnips harvested early in the season have a more delicate texture and sweeter flavor that allows them to be consumed raw.

Selection: Pick small- to medium-sized turnips that have a smooth, unblemished exterior and feel firm and heavy for their size. Attached greens should be crisp and fresh, and the roots should have a bright, creamy color with a violet-hued ring around the top.

Storage: Refrigerate turnips in a loosely sealed plastic bag for up to a week. Remove any greens before storing.

Fun Fact: During Germany's "turnip winter" of World War 1 (1916-1917), turnips saw a major shift in use from animal feed-stock to human consumption. German families and soldiers survived on the cold-hardy turnips as substitute for meat and potatoes, which were both extremely scarce. Turnips were used as substitutes for both coffee and flour, and became the omnipresent ingredient in "war bread."





Turnip Greens

Season: Spring, Fall

Characteristics: Turnip greens are the long, narrow, sharp-flavored leaves of the turnip root vegetable. They are known for their bite, with a pungent, peppery, sharp flavor similar to that of mustard greens. Though they can be eaten raw, turnip greens are most commonly eaten cooked, similarly to other dark leafy greens. Several varieties of turnips are specifically grown for their leaves.



Selection: Choose turnips with crisp, unblemished, deeply colored leaves.

Storage: Refrigerate turnip greens in a loosely sealed plastic bag for three to five days.



Fun Fact: The noticeably bitter taste of turnip greens has been linked by researchers to its calcium content. On an ounce-for-ounce basis, turnip greens contain about four times more calcium than a much less bitter-tasting cruciferous vegetable like cabbage. Even in comparison to mustard greens, turnip greens contain about twice the calcium content.



Watermelons

Season: Summer

Characteristics: Watermelon is a refreshing warm-season fruit that can range in size from a few pounds to nearly 100 pounds. It has a smooth, thick, yellow and green rind that is patterned with light green stripes. Watermelon is generally consumed raw, since its high water content makes it difficult to cook with.



Selection: Look for watermelons that are large and heavy for their size, with relatively smooth rinds that are neither overly shiny nor overly dull. Ripe watermelons should be a creamy yellow on their underside and will give a deep, hollow sound when thumped.

Storage: Store whole watermelons at room temperature in a cool, dry place for two to three weeks. Once cut, watermelon can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to a week.



Fun Fact: Watermelon rinds, usually a light green or white color, are also edible and contain many hidden nutrients, but most people avoid eating them due to their unusual flavor when eaten raw. Several cultural cuisines from around the world use the rind as a vegetable, stir-frying, stewing or even pickling it.



Zucchini

Season: Summer, Fall

Characteristics: The delicate flavor, soft shell and creamy white flesh of zucchini, a type of summer squash, is a perfect addition to any summer meal. Summer squashes are members of the Cucurbitaceae family of plants, and relatives of both the melon and the cucumber. They have a high water content and can be eaten raw or cooked.



Selection: Select small- to medium-sized zucchini that are firm and feel heavy for their size. Their skins should look shiny and smooth with a bright, even green color and no blemishes.

Storage: Refrigerate unwashed zucchini in a perforated plastic bag in the crisper drawer for up to five days. Cooked zucchini should be covered, refrigerated and used within two days.



Fun Fact: The word *zucchini* comes from the Italian word “*zucca*,” meaning summer squash.

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