

Think Safety When Buying and Handling Fresh Produce

Barbara Ingham, Extension Food Safety Specialist, UW-Madison

During summer and fall, garden baskets, market stands and grocery shelves fill with fresh fruits and vegetables. These fruits and vegetables are recognized as important components of a healthy diet because they are sources of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and antioxidants. But because fruits and vegetables are grown in a natural environment, they can become contaminated with harmful pathogens from soil or water, from animals, or when un-composted manure is used as fertilizer. Produce can also be contaminated during harvest, packing, processing, distribution or preparation.

Eating contaminated fruits or vegetables, or juices made from contaminated produce, can lead to a serious - and sometimes fatal – foodborne illness. Recent foodborne illness outbreaks have been



linked to popular produce items: sprouted seeds, spinach, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and green onions. Despite this threat, it's easy to help protect yourself and your family from illness by following these steps for choosing and preparing fresh fruits and vegetables.

Buying Tips for Fresh Produce. If you are buying fresh fruits or vegetables at the market or grocery store, you can help keep produce safe by making wise buying decisions.

- Purchase produce that is not bruised or damaged.
- When selecting fresh-cut produce - such as a half a watermelon or diced tomatoes - choose only those items that are refrigerated or surrounded by ice.
- Bag fresh fruits and vegetables separately from meat, poultry and seafood products when packing them to take home from the market.
- Place produce in clean bags for transport. Reusable cloth bags or totes are increasingly popular for market shopping. If re-using bags, make sure to launder them often enough to keep them clean and prevent transfer of germs on to fresh produce.

Storage Tips for Fresh Produce. Whether produce is harvested from the garden, or purchased at a grocery or farmers' market, there are certain things that you can do to maintain both safety and quality.

- Certain perishable fresh fruits and vegetables (like strawberries, lettuce, herbs, and mushrooms) can be best maintained by storing in a clean refrigerator at a temperature of 32°-40° F.
- All produce that is purchased pre-cut or peeled should be kept in the refrigerator to maintain both quality and safety. Limit the time out of refrigeration, to just two hours. If you are traveling or at a picnic and the time out of refrigeration extends beyond two hours, discard these items.
- Other produce such as uncut tomatoes, bananas, potatoes and onions are best stored at cool room temperature, and refrigerated only when peeled, cut or sliced.
- Produce should not be washed before storage as excess water will encourage the growth of spoilage bacteria.

A UWEX publication, **Storing Fruits and Vegetables from the Home Garden A3823**, offers tips on maintaining quality of harvested produce <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/index.aspx>

Preparation Tips for Fresh Produce. *Always wash fresh produce!* This includes produce grown conventionally or organically at home, or produce that is purchased from a grocery store or farmers' market.

- 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 before preparing or eating.
- Gently rub produce while holding under plain running water. There's no need to use soap or a produce wash.
- Wash produce BEFORE you peel it, so dirt and bacteria aren't transferred from the knife onto the fruit or vegetable.
- Use a clean vegetable brush to scrub firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers.
- Dry produce with a clean cloth or paper towel to further reduce bacteria that may be present.
- Throw away the outermost leaves of a head of lettuce or cabbage which can trap dirt and harmful bacteria



What about pre-washed produce? Even though many bagged produce items like lettuce mixes are prewashed, UW-Extension recommends that **all** produce items be washed before eating or preparing.

Separate for Safety. 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.



In addition, be sure to:

- Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils and countertops with warm water and soap between the preparation of raw meat, poultry and seafood products and the preparation of all fruits and vegetables, especially produce that will not be cooked.
- If you use plastic or other non-porous cutting boards, run them through the dishwasher after use, or wash with warm soapy water, rinse and then sanitize in a dilute bleach solution (see below). May, 2011.

For added protection, kitchen sanitizers can be used on cutting boards and counter tops to kill bacteria that may remain on cleaned surfaces. Begin by washing and rinsing the cutting board, knife or other utensil, then rinse with a dilute bleach solution: **one teaspoon of chlorine bleach to one quart of water**. Dip or spray, and then allow to air-dry. The chlorine will evaporate, leaving the surface free of bacteria. [Note: be sure to use regular, unscented bleach for sanitizing your kitchen.]

For more information on the safety of fresh produce: Contact your county Extension agent.