

## Good Nutrition at Farmers Markets

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There are more than 6,100 farmers markets in the U.S., and the number is growing. This NebGuide discusses the advantages of buying produce and other food at a local farmers market.

Farmers markets are becoming a more common sight across the nation. In 1974, there were fewer than 100 farmers markets in the U.S. Currently, there are more than 6,100. What is a farmers market? It is an association of local farmers who assemble at a defined location to sell their produce directly to consumers. Farmers markets are found in all 50 states with many of them being seasonal rather than year-round. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that more than 1 million people visit farmers markets each week. To find a farmers market in your area, go to this website: <http://apps.ams.usda.gov/FarmersMarkets>.

### What are some advantages of buying fresh fruits and vegetables at a farmers market, rather than a grocery store?

- **Fresher food**
  - Most of the produce you buy at the grocery store is picked before it is ripe and transported as much as 2,000 miles before it reaches the store. In contrast, farmers market produce is generally ripened on the plant, picked right before the market, and transported less than 50 miles. This makes farmers market produce fresher. You can find a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables at farmers markets that are packed with vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals. MyPyramid recommends that the average adult eat 2 cups of fruit and 2 ½ cups of vegetables per day (based on a 2,000 calorie diet). Purchasing and eating produce from a farmers market may improve your eating habits and food preparation skills.
- **Personal contact**
  - Most often, at farmers markets, you are talking directly to the people who grew the produce. They can tell you how they grew it, what fertilizers or pesticides they used, what variety they planted, and can answer other questions you may have.
- **Family time**
  - The farmers market is a great opportunity to spend time with your family. It is free, other than the items



purchased, and is also a fun way to get a little extra physical activity.

- **Community impact**
  - By purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables at a local farmers market, your food dollars are boosting the local economy by supporting the small, family-owned farms in the area.

### Farmers markets have a completely different environment than grocery stores. How do you decide which items to purchase — and when to keep looking?

- **Choose ripe, unblemished produce.**
  - Farmers market produce is often softer and juicier than grocery store produce — many farmers market varieties are bred for flavor, not for quantity and long transportation times. You can expect tomatoes, peaches, and other fruits to be a bit softer than you would find in a grocery store.
  - Keep an eye out for bruised and broken skin. If the skin is broken, the surface of the produce is slimy, or there are soft spots on a portion of the fruit or vegetable, it has been bruised and will spoil more rapidly. You should choose produce that is free of all signs of bruising and spoilage. Shop early to get the best selection.
- **Choose what you will use.**
  - Fresh produce from a farmers market may have a shorter shelf life than the lettuce you buy pre-bagged at the store. Purchase only what you can use or preserve within a few days.

**Table I. Nutrients and sources in fruits and vegetables.**

| <i>Nutrient</i>  | <i>Role in the Body</i>  | <i>Sources</i>   |
|------------------|--|--|
| <b>Vitamin A</b> | Keeps eyes and skin healthy and helps to protect against infections.                 | Cantaloupe, carrots, Chinese cabbage, kale, pumpkin, red peppers, spinach, sweet potatoes, turnip greens, collard greens, mustard greens, winter squash          |
| <b>Vitamin C</b> | Helps heal cuts and wounds and keeps teeth and gums healthy.                         | Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cantaloupe, cauliflower, kale, kiwi, mangoes, oranges, pineapples, red and green peppers, strawberries, sweet potatoes, tomato juice |
| <b>Potassium</b> | Helps to maintain a healthy blood pressure.  | Carrot juice, cooked greens, lima beans, prune juice, sweet potatoes, tomato paste, tomato puree, white beans, white potatoes                                    |
| <b>Fiber</b>     | Many benefits, including decreased risk of coronary artery disease and colon cancer. | Artichokes, beans (navy, kidney, black, pinto, lima, white, soybeans), lentils, peas (split, chick, black-eyed)  |

**Why are fruits and vegetables important for good health?**

A healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables may help protect you and your family from chronic disease, such as some cancers, heart disease, high blood pressure, and strokes. By choosing nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables, you are getting a good source of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and phytochemicals for the calories you consume. Remember, most fruits and vegetables are naturally low in fat and calories. *Table I* shows the different nutrients we get from fruits and vegetables, the role that nutrients can play in the body, and the fruits and vegetables that are good sources of those nutrients.

**What are phytochemicals?**

Phytochemicals may help protect against aging and reduce the risk of some cancers and heart disease. Some nutrition experts say we get phytochemicals by eating a variety of colors of fruits and vegetables. *Table II* divides fruits, vegetables, and beans/legumes into groups based on their color.

**Using your five senses at a farmers market**

While you are at a farmers market, enjoy using all five of your senses. See the vendors and other shoppers enjoying themselves, as well as the beautiful, fresh produce. Look at the produce before you buy it to make sure it is free of bruises and other damage, and make sure to look in your bag to see if it contains a rainbow of colors.

Smell the fresh produce, flowers, popcorn, and meats being cooked on the grill.

Feel the different produce, such as plump tomatoes, unhusked corn, and smooth, silky eggplant. Remember to put heavier, firmer produce in the bottom or your bag/basket. Taste the free samples: fresh baked breads, fresh produce, meats, cheese, nuts, etc. Try one new fruit and vegetable from the farmers market each week. Ask the vendor or your local extension office how to prepare new foods you find at the market. Enjoy the sound of everything going on around you, the crunch of an apple or carrot, the music, and the people.

**Is there anything special I need to do with my fresh fruits and vegetables from the farmers market?**

Go directly home from the market. Avoid side trips. Foods will decline in quality, and perishable foods like

meats and eggs can pose food safety problems if left sitting in your car. Additional tips for handling food for best safety and quality:

- Different fruits and vegetables require different temperature and humidity levels for proper storage. Some foods that taste best stored at room temperature include bananas, melons, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and winter squashes. Store them in a clean, dry, well-ventilated place, away from direct sunlight and away from areas where meat is prepared.
- Some produce can be ripened on the counter and then stored in the refrigerator. Examples include avocados, kiwifruit, nectarines, peaches, pears, and plums. Avoid placing produce in a sealed plastic bag on your countertop. This slows ripening and may increase off-odors and decay from the accumulation of carbon dioxide and depletion of oxygen inside the bag.
- Most other fresh fruits and vegetables keep best stored in a clean refrigerator at a temperature of 40°F or below. Store whole fruits and vegetables in separate crisper drawers in your refrigerator. 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.
- Refrigerate fruits and vegetables in perforated plastic bags to help maintain moisture yet provide air flow. Unperforated plastic bags can lead to the growth of mold or bacteria. If you do not 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).
- If fruits and vegetables are placed on refrigerator shelves, store meats on pans or plates below the produce to prevent meat juices — which may contain harmful bacteria — from dripping on them.
- Wash hands before preparing produce. Wash with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds.
- Wash produce thoroughly. Wash produce before you use it, NOT when you bring it home. Fresh produce has a natural protective coating that helps retain moisture and freshness. Washing produce before storage causes

**Table II. Putting Color in Your Diet**

| <i>Color</i>      | <i>Function</i>  | <i>Fruits</i>   | <i>Vegetables</i>   | <i>Beans/Legumes</i>  |
|-------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Red               | Eating a wide variety of red fruits and vegetables may help improve heart health, memory function, and urinary tract health.         | Blood oranges, cherries, pomegranates, raspberries, red apples, red/pink grapefruit, red grapes, red pears, strawberries, watermelon                      | Beets, radicchio, radishes, red onions, red peppers, red potatoes, rhubarb, tomatoes  | Red/pink kidney beans, red lentils, red/pink pinto beans  |
| Orange/<br>Yellow | Eating a wide variety of orange/yellow fruits and vegetables may help keep your immune system, eyes, and heart healthy.              | Apricots, cantaloupe, grapefruit, lemons, mangoes, nectarines, oranges, papayas, peaches, persimmons, pineapples, tangerines, yellow apples, yellow pears | Butternut squash, carrots, pumpkin, rutabagas, sweet corn, sweet potatoes, yellow beets, yellow peppers, yellow summer squash, yellow tomatoes, yellow winter squash                          | Yellow lentils, yellow split peas   |
| Green             | Eating a wide variety of green fruits and vegetables may help keep your eyes healthy and maintain strong bones and teeth.            | Avocados, green apples, green grapes, green pears, honeydew melon, kiwi, limes  | Artichokes, arugula, asparagus, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, celery, cucumbers, green beans, green/Chinese cabbage, green peppers, leafy greens, leeks, lettuce, okra, peas, spinach, zucchini | Edamame, green lentils, green split peas, lima beans  |
| Blue/<br>Purple   | Eating a wide variety of blue/purple fruits and vegetables may help memory function, healthy aging, and urinary tract health.        | Black currants, blackberries, blueberries, dried plums, elderberries, plums, purple figs, purple grapes, raisins  | Black salsify, eggplant, purple asparagus, purple Belgian endive, purple cabbage, purple carrots, purple potatoes, purple peppers   | Black beans, black soybeans   |
| White             | Eating a wide variety of white fruits and vegetables may help improve heart health and may help maintain healthy cholesterol levels. | Bananas, brown pears, cherimoyas, dates, white nectarines, white peaches  | Cauliflower, garlic, ginger, Jerusalem artichokes, jicama, kohlrabi, mushrooms, onions, parsnips, potatoes, shallots, turnips, white corn   | Black-eyed peas, brown lentils, garbanzo beans, great northern beans, navy beans, soybeans, white beans |

faster spoilage. Remove and discard outer leaves. Rinse under clean, running water just before preparing or eating. Do not use soap or detergent; it can get into produce and make you sick. Rub briskly — scrubbing with a clean brush or hands — to clean the surface. Dry with a clean cloth or paper towel.

If you haven't had an opportunity to go to your local farmers market, you are missing a unique experience. Support your local farmers and check it out sometime. You will find that farm fresh produce is not only tasty, but attending a farmers market will help you get a little extra physical activity and add some color to your next meal.

**What should I bring to a farmers market?**

- Cash, because many vendors do not take checks or credit cards. Try to bring small bills just in case the vendor does not have enough change.
- Water to drink, especially if it is hot.
- A bag or basket for the produce.
- A cooler to keep your produce cool on the drive home.

**This publication has been peer reviewed.**

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**Index: Foods & Nutrition  
Food**

Issued November 2010

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

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