

Maximizing Produce, Minimizing Waste

Smart buying strategies and proper storage can help you get the most nutritional bang for your buck.

Published: January 9, 2020 Updated: December 14, 2020



© pashapixel | Getty Images

Nobody intends to overbuy fresh produce, but we're all familiar with the mystery bag of green mush at the bottom of the crisper drawer. Buying too much food, serving too much at meals, and improper storage are ways Americans waste food at home, to the tune of \$2,200 per year, according to researchers at Tufts University.

Fresh is Not Always Best: Buying frozen fruits and vegetables is an excellent way to avoid produce waste while still getting nutritional quality that is at least as good as fresh. It is also a money saver when foods are not in season. Frozen berries, for example, can be used year-round in favorites like smoothies, parfaits, and oatmeal. Frozen is also ideal for whatever go-to vegetables you like to always have on hand. Choices like broccoli and green beans can be stand-alone sides or ingredients in soups and casseroles. It doesn't hurt that most frozen produce is conveniently pre-cut. Some canned vegetables, like tomatoes, corn, and mushrooms, are also smart choices for stocking the pantry. They are nutritious (opt for the no-salt versions), have a long shelf-life, and are a time-saver.

Making the Most of Fresh Produce: The first rule of shopping for fresh produce is to plan a few recipes for the week. Before making a shopping list, take stock of what you already have in the refrigerator, then buy as close as possible to the amount you need. It's generally better not to pre-wash produce until ready to use, as this removes any protective coating it may have. The moisture remaining on fruits and vegetables can cause them to mold and spoil prematurely. An exception to this rule is lettuce, which should be washed and dried before refrigerating the leaves in a plastic bag with a few dry paper towels to absorb excess moisture.

Proper storage of fresh produce maximizes flavor, preserves nutrients, minimizes waste, and saves cash. Storage choices have a big impact on how long produce stays fresh and can also affect taste and texture. Tomatoes, for example, can develop an unpleasant mealy texture when refrigerated. Pineapple, bananas, whole melons, peaches, plums, and pears are best kept on the counter—at room temperature and out of direct sunlight—until they ripen. Potatoes, onions, and garlic are ideally stored in a cool, dry, well-ventilated place, such as an uncrowded pantry shelf or a countertop out of direct sunlight.

All other produce should be kept in the fridge, preferably in crisper drawers to maintain moisture. The ideal refrigerator temperature is between 35 and 38 degrees Fahrenheit. Avoid storing strawberries, grapes, cherries, and blueberries in unventilated bags or containers; they keep better when they can release moisture. Some vegetables, like asparagus and fresh herbs, do well wrapped in a moist paper towel or standing in a glass of water in the refrigerator.

Reduce Food Waste: Buying frozen (or canned) fruits and vegetables and limiting portions of fresh produce can help cut food waste. Freezing (or canning) fresh fruits and vegetables is a great way to preserve them. Utilize the freezer to keep extras for future meals and to save overripe produce and scraps for use in vegetable stocks, smoothies, and baked goods. Some foods, like berries, can be frozen as is. Others should be sliced (like bananas) or blanched (like green beans) before freezing. It's practically impossible to avoid all spoilage. If produce does spoil, toss it into a compost bin. Plan to make the most of your produce by purchasing the type—fresh, frozen, or canned—and amount that suit your needs, and be sure to utilize the best storage strategies to minimize food waste.

Skillet Pasta Dinner

Makes: 6 Servings

Total Cost: \$\$\$\$



Ingredients

- 1/2 pound ground turkey, 85% lean (or ground sausage or beef)
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced (approximately 1 teaspoon)
- 1 can tomato sauce (8 ounce)
- 1 cup water
- 8 ounces uncooked tube pasta (ziti, penne, or macaroni)
- 2 cups fresh or frozen vegetables (try zucchini and carrots)

Directions

1. Brown the ground meat, onion, and garlic in a skillet or heavy saucepan. Drain off any grease.
2. Add the tomatoes, tomato sauce, water, and uncooked pasta.
3. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes.
4. Add the fresh or frozen vegetables, stir and continue cooking until the pasta and vegetables are tender (about 10 more minutes).

**Do you like recipes and information like this?
Like our Facebook page and get daily posts on meal ideas, health tips, and recipes!
@FoodWiseExtensionBrownCounty**

UW-Madison Division of Extension FoodWise Brown County
2019 Technology Way, Green Bay, WI 54311 (920)391-4610
browncountywi.gov



Source:

ONIE Project - Oklahoma Nutrition Information and Education. Simple Healthy Recipes.