It is the season of fresh produce! Fruits, berries and fresh greens are readily available in the grocery stores and at the farmers market. Let’s take a few minutes today to think about how to select and care for fresh fruits. Next week we’ll talk about vegetables.

Most commercially grown fruit is picked before it is ripe and is shipped green. It ships better, but the flavor never develops to the same level it does when ripened on the tree or bush. That is why we always want to choose locally grown fruit if it is available. It is riper when picked and has a better flavor.

Produce follows a predictable pattern of when each is ripe. Right now strawberries are at the height of their season, soon to be followed by cherries, apricots, peaches and melons. You can get all these fruits throughout the year, but they always have the best flavor and cheapest cost when they are in season. A good indication of what is in season is that the price goes down and the quality goes up.

There is nothing worse than paying good money for a product and finding that the flavor isn’t there.

Here are a few hints on choosing the best produce for your money.

Fruit should be smooth and even. Pick it up and hold it in your hand. Check for dents, bruises or pockmarks on the surface.

Let your nose be your guide. Peaches should smell like peaches — and a nice sweet fragrance is a good indication that the fruit is at its best. Choose fruit that has a strong smell of the fruit, particularly near the stem. But if it begins to smell too strong or sour, that is an indication that it is overripe.

Choose fruits that are the color they should be. Green is fine on a Granny Smith apple, but not on that fresh peach. Choose the ones that are fully ripe and have no green spots.
Avoid bruised fruit. Not only are you paying for something that will be trimmed out and thrown away, bruised flesh can harbor bacteria that will cause spoilage as well as make it unsafe to eat.

The exceptions to the firm fruit rule are peaches, cantaloupes, nectarines, mangos and papayas. These fruits should give slightly when you pressed.

Pay attention to the weight. Those fruits that are heavy in relation to their size are an indication of the amount of juice in the fruit. As these fruits move toward being overripe, the moisture evaporates leaving a drier, less juicy fruit. Particularly when it comes to melons and pineapples, choose the heaviest one and you’ll be pleased with the freshness of the product.

Cantaloupes are a special case. It is one fruit that picks itself — it releases the vine when it is ripe. So check the stem end and make sure it has a small crater at the stem and that no remainder of the stem is attached.

How do you store these fruits once you bring them home from the store? Most fruits should be stored in the refrigerator at a temperature of 35 to 40 degrees. There are a couple of exceptions, particularly tomatoes and bananas. Yes, tomatoes are a fruit. These should be stored at room temperature and used promptly.

For specific information on storage, be sure to download a one-page pamphlet from the More Matters folks that gives instructions on how to store fruits and vegetables at http://bit.ly/1bbgw3u.

Fruits can be a nutritious addition to your family meals. Just make sure you get a good buy for your money.

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