Fresh vegetables are in season. Locally at the farmers market, greens are in good supply this week with kale, spinach and collards leading the pack. Zucchini and yellow summer squash are just starting to get ripe and there are a few tomatoes coming on to the market.

Vegetables are an important part of a good diet. According to the latest recommendations, half your plate should be vegetables.

At this price, though, you want to make sure that you get every nutrient that is provided in the vegetables. It is estimated that nearly 25 percent of the food you bring into your house is lost through waste. Taking care of those vegetables so you get all the natural goodness is important to your food budget.

When you get home with those wonderful fresh vegetables, how do you keep them at their best? Different vegetables have different storage methods. Potatoes and onions are stored at room temperature, while greens, squash and beans need to be kept in the refrigerator.

Many vegetables are highly perishable. Peppers, fresh beans, squash and greens should be used within a two- to three-day period for maximum flavor and freshness. These vegetables should be stored in a perforated plastic bag and stored in the vegetable crisper in the refrigerator. The plastic bag helps conserve moisture and freshness, while the holes in the bag keep the moisture from causing rot.

Store cucumbers, eggplant, potatoes, onions and garlic at room temperature. Refrigerator temperatures can cause cold damage and keep the vegetables from properly ripening.

Be sure to keep vegetables away from direct sunlight. This is particularly important with potatoes. Potatoes exposed to sunlight develop a form of chlorophyll called solanine that show up as green spots. These green sections of the potato are a natural toxin and are poisonous. There isn’t much danger of you eating the green spots since they are very bitter. That’s why the bags that potatoes come in are tinted brown, to protect the potatoes from developing solanine under the lights in the store.
Never use detergent or bleach to wash produce. Fresh water will do the job. Rinse vegetables under running water just prior to serving. Give the same treatment to those with skins and rinds, even if they aren’t eaten. Bacteria that might be present on the rind can easily be transferred to the part you eat during the peeling process. Wash just prior to eating since washing removes some of the natural preservatives in plants.

The exception to this rule is head lettuce or leafy greens. They should be washed immediately when you get home and then refrigerated. If the vegetables are labeled ready-to-eat, washed or triple washed, they don’t have to be washed. All cut, peeled or cooked fruits and vegetables (as all foods) should be refrigerated within two hours.

Cooperative Extension has a great series of publications on how to use those fresh Alaska vegetables. Our Alaska series features information on selection, storage, preservation and a few recipes to try out in using them. Go to the Cooperative Extension foods and nutrition publication page at http://bit.ly/W5S8zh and check for publications on beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, corn, lettuce, potatoes, summer squash, tomatoes, sugar snap peas, winter squash, chard, herbs and pumpkin seeds.

Fresh vegetables are one of the best parts of summer. Buy good quality produce, take care of it properly, and cook it lightly to conserve nutrients.

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