Summer is here and with it comes a full bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables. No matter if you are growing them in your garden or frequenting the farmer’s market or even your favorite grocery store, fresh produce is at top quality and should be at the top of your dining list.

There is some disagreement about how many vegetables we should be eating. Current recommendations say five portions a day, but many nutritionists say we should be consuming from eight to 10. No matter, June 17 is Eat Your Vegetables Day. Start at the five portions level and strive to eat as many vegetables as possible to get a good solid start on better health.

What is a serving of vegetables? It is considered 1 cup of leafy vegetables or one-half cup of regular vegetables. Last night I had a salad that probably would qualify for four servings (two of greens and two of corn, beans and tomatoes). So hitting that five-servings mark is easier than you think.

Fresh vegetables are not one of the low-priced areas of our food budget. If you buy them in the store, there’s a good chance they are a big part of your budget. We don’t mind paying for good produce, but how do you know that what you are taking home is fresh, wholesome and really tastes good?

Let your nose be your guide. Fresh vegetables and fruits should smell fresh and have a pleasant odor. If it smells too strong, it is probably over the hill. Hunt for fresher products.

Check the color. Know what color the products should be and avoid those that are not fully ripe. Some vegetables, such as peppers, set on the plant fully ripe and just keep getting bigger. Most others turn from green to the correct color when ripe. The brighter the color, the fresher the produce.
Look for lumps, bumps and soft spots. Produce that has damage or soft spots will soon be moldy. My niece sent me a picture the other day of perfect little circles around each little bump on the surface of a cucumber. She thought she had something unusual and I had to tell her she just had an overripe cucumber. In one more day she had mold in each of those soft circles.

Leafy vegetables should be crisp and firm, with no wilt or brown spots. Make sure they haven’t started getting limp. Now, if you store something too long and it gets limp, you can resuscitate the produce (lettuce, carrots, leafy greens, and celery) by placing it in ice water for a few minutes. The cells will pull in the water and plump up. But avoid spending money on fruits or vegetables that are already limp.

Buy vegetables that are in season. Those that are in season will be at the height of flavor and will be the best buy.

Choose local if you can. If you are at the farmers market, local is a given. However, if you are at the store, check the little labels on the fruit or vegetables. It will tell you where it is grown. As we say with Alaska-grown produce, it is fresher by far.

Cooperative Extension has a series of publications that will tell you how to select and cook all those vegetables that grow well in Alaska. Lettuce, cabbage, turnips, chard, and summer squash are just a few of those you can find on our website at http://bit.ly/W5S8zh.

Take a look around at your grocery store or at the farmers market and choose some old favorites to use in meals. And while you’re at it, choose something new to expand your palate. Had any jicama lately? How about watercress? Try it, you just might like it.

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