Storing Fruits and Vegetables

Knowing how to properly store your fruits and veggies can help you keep them fresh longer. A handy chart produced by food safety and fruit and vegetable specialists with University of Tennessee Extension was originally designed as a guide for those who prepare and store foods in commercial settings, like schools, health care facilities or restaurants; but the information can be useful to average consumers, too.

Those who have multiple refrigerators or those with newer refrigerators with the ability to store fresh produce in separate temperature- or humidity-controlled compartments may find the chart especially useful. The chart lists the ideal temperatures to store various fruits and veggies as well as the average length of time the produce can be safely stored.

“Enhancing the Safety of Locally Grown Produce” (UT Extension publication SP 768-F) says storing produce at the proper temperature is critical to preserving shelf life. For example, most berries can be stored at 32 degrees Fahrenheit for only a few short days, while snap beans and okra can be stored at about 45 degrees Fahrenheit for seven to 10 days. Many crops, like cabbage and rhubarb measure their shelf life in weeks and months, depending on the temperature.

The chart also includes information on fruits and veggies that “play nice” together, i.e. those that can be stored together without concern and those that should be segregated from other produce because they may negatively affect the taste or freshness of other produce stored in the same compartment. For example, most fruits should be stored separately from vegetables because many fruits produce high levels of ethylene, which is the ripening hormone. Ethylene can compromise the quality and reduce the shelf life of other crops by causing bitterness, softening, discoloration and stem detachment.

Humidity, too, can play a huge role in how long produce will remain fresh in the fridge. Most fruits and vegetables will have a longer shelf life when stored at higher relative humidity levels. This is why refrigerators have “hydrators” or crisper drawers, which tend to have higher humidity than the rest of the refrigerator. Be sure to use these drawers, as the ideal relative humidity for the majority of fruits and vegetables is 90-95 percent. Root crops, however, like onions and garlic, will decay more quickly at high humidity levels, so they should be stored at 65-75 percent relative humidity for maximum shelf life in a cool basement or root cellar.
Also, for maximum flavor and quality, some fruits and vegetables are better stored on the counter, such as tropical fruits (mangoes, bananas, avocado, etc.) and tomatoes.

Faith Critzer, a UT Extension food safety specialist, reminds consumers who have refrigerators with only a single thermostat for the entire compartment that the setting needs to be at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or lower to ensure the overall safety of foods in the fridge.

To read or download the chart go online to the UT Extension publications webpage (extension.utk.edu/publications) and search “locally grown produce,” or contact your local county UT Extension office. The publication can also be viewed directly online at extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP768-F.pdf.

The publication was produced in cooperation with Extension specialists from the University of Georgia, Clemson and the University of Virginia.

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