

# The ripe stuff: Why seasonal eating can be a healthy delight

July 15 2024, by Michael Merschel

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A supermarket can be a tough place to be in sync with the seasons. We're not talking about how Halloween decorations arrive in August, either: It's because in the produce section, many fruits and vegetables are available

year-round, and those that aren't can probably be found in the frozen foods aisle.

Such abundance is hardly a problem. But eating foods in season has advantages, nutritionists say. Here are some of their fresh-picked thoughts on how and why you might enjoy doing so.

## **It's a matter of taste**

Let's skip straight to the yummy part: In-season fruits and vegetables are delicious.

"Speaking from [personal experience](#), I've found that the taste and nutritional quality of certain foods can vary significantly depending on whether they are in season or not," said Wendy Lopez, a registered dietitian nutritionist and co-founder of a virtual diabetes nutrition counseling service in the Hudson Valley area of New York.

She describes in-season tomatoes, harvested in the summer, as "incredibly rich, sweet and juicy." But out-of-season tomatoes, which often are grown in greenhouses or imported, "can be quite bland and watery because they're picked before fully ripening."

Fall apples tend to be juicier and more flavorful because they are picked at peak ripeness, Lopez said. "In contrast, apples that have been kept chilled for several months may lose some of their crispness and natural sweetness, and their texture can become mealy."

## **A feast for the eyes**

You can sometimes see the difference between a fruit that is in season and one that is not, said Annie Cavalier, a registered dietitian nutritionist

in Dallas. Consider a traditional summer favorite: strawberries. Out of season, "they're not going to be very sweet. But more than that, when you bite into one, it's going to be really white on the inside."

A ripe, in-season strawberry is "going to be a lot sweeter" and red all the way through. Those pigments correspond with a higher antioxidant content, she said. "So when you have those fruits and those vegetables that are richer in color, richer in flavor, that usually means that they're actually higher in nutrients as well."

## **A nutritional edge**

In general, Cavalier said, "eating from the farm, or from the garden where it comes from, is going to help ensure that you're getting the most nutrients for that food."

That's because once a fruit is picked, its nutritional content can decline, Lopez said, and the longer the time between harvest and consumption, the greater the potential loss of vitamins and antioxidants. "Vitamins, particularly vitamin C, degrade during storage, meaning apples kept for several months may have lower levels of certain nutrients compared to freshly harvested ones," she said.

Frozen foods are nutritionally equivalent with those that are fresh and in season, Cavalier said. Food producers "actually flash-freeze those almost immediately after they're harvested, so it is preserving a lot of those nutrients."

But freezing can change a food's texture—which might not matter sometimes, she said. "Depending on the form that you're going to eat it in—like if you're doing it in a soup or stir-fry or something like that—it might not even be noticeable."

Still, it's a tradeoff, Lopez said. "Thawed frozen fruits like strawberries or peaches may not have the same crispness or juiciness as fresh ones."

And seasonal eating also offers some indirect nutritional advantages, Cavalier said. If your diet shifts with the season, it "ensures that you're eating a wider range of those fruits and vegetables—which in turn means that you're getting a wider variety of nutrients."

## **Matters of money and access**

For the most part, Cavalier said, seasonal foods can be cheaper, thanks to the laws of supply and demand: If a food is in season, suppliers will have more of it and prices should be lower. "Whereas if it's a food that's not in season, not only do you have less of it, but they're also having to transport it from far away," she said. "So then you're having to pay for those transport fees, the refrigeration fees, all of those things that really add up and can make the out-of-season foods more expensive."

Some supermarkets have contracts that keep prices consistent year-round, she said, but at a locally owned farmers market, "you're definitely going to save more money" by shopping in season.

Availability of seasonal foods is influenced by many factors, Lopez said, and access to them is not equal. But innovative approaches can address that problem.

Some areas, for instance, take part in community-supported agriculture programs to connect consumers directly with local farmers, she said. Mobile markets that operate from trucks, vans or buses can reach neighborhoods with few grocery stores.

And programs nationwide, such as New York City's Health Bucks, provide vouchers that match federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program benefits spent at participating markets, she said, "increasing the purchasing power of low-income families and contributing towards a healthier, more equitable food system."

Lopez once worked with New York City's health department doing cooking demonstrations in [farmers markets](#) in the Bronx. "We would engage the community about how to incorporate local and seasonal produce in ways that were culturally relevant," she said, which provided [nutrition education](#) and helped create a sense of community "by bringing people together to learn and share about what foods they grew up eating."

## **How to tell what's in season**

Lopez and Cavalier both recommend the Seasonal Food Guide, an app and [website](#) from the GRACE Communications Foundation that draws on data from several sources to offer a state-by-state look at what's in season.

Both also say that visiting a local farmers market can show you what's in season and pay off in other ways, too.

"Talking to the local farmers can really come in handy, because they'll know exactly what's growing at that specific time," Cavalier said. She's actually discovered tasty heirloom varieties by talking with sellers.

"They'll introduce me to something that I haven't tried before, and most of the time, it's absolutely delicious."

## **They're important in any form**

In season or out, fresh or frozen, fruits and vegetables are part of a healthy eating pattern.

"Fruits and vegetables are going to be some of the most nutrient-dense foods that we have in our diet," Cavalier said. [Federal dietary guidelines](#) recommend adults eat 1.5 to 2 cups of [fruit](#) each day and 3 to 4 cups of vegetables. A diet rich in plant-based foods can lower the risk for a heart attack and other types of cardiovascular disease.

"If seasonal eating is not an option for you, making sure that you're eating those fruits and vegetables regardless is the most important thing," Cavalier said.

But if it is an option, eating fresh produce in season definitely falls into the category of things that are good for you that you can actually look forward to. Just make sure to properly store [fresh produce](#). For example, put plums and peaches in a paper bag to ripen, then move them to the refrigerator to last a few days longer.

"One of my summer favorites is peaches, bursting with sweetness and fragrance when they're perfectly ripe," Lopez said. She also has recipes that call for squash blossoms.

Local farmers markets have helped Cavalier discover tasty new varieties of salad greens. And she gets excited about the arrival of "all of the stone fruits. That's going to be apricots, peaches, plums, cherries—all of those types of fruits I think are so, so much better when they're in season."

Provided by American Heart Association

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