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How to Select the Freshest Produce

by Jessica Kevinston

Article published on May 18th 2012 | Business

As much as we would all love to purchase local, organic produce exclusively, the fact of the matter is that doing so can be ridiculously expensive. Moreover, most states donâ€™t boast the freshest fruits and vegetables in the dead of winter, so your options essentially lay between purchasing organic canned or frozen produce (which means that lettuce, cucumbers, and other fresh-only produce will be left out entirely), building your own greenhouse (as if you have the time for that!), or giving in and buying those Chilean grapes or Mexican avocados. Of course, this can be an equally disappointing experience. Foreign fruits are often picked green, irradiated, and kept in near-freezing shipping containers, only to turn mushy once you buy it. Fortunately, there are a few ways to make sure that that foreign produce is as ripe and fresh as possible. And once summer arrives again, you can go the fresh, local, organic route once again.

Geography

Always check the plastic packaging to find out the country of origin. In general, the closer it is to your state, the fresher it will be. There may be some safety concerns in terms of the country of origin, but most of these can be eliminated by washing the produce thoroughly in water and a chemical-cutting formula. And remember, while Mexico has had its share of E.Coli outbreaks, so has nearly every agriculture company in the U.S.

Store Quality

Not all grocery stores were created equally. High quality stores will carry the freshest produceâ€”thereâ€™s just no getting around that. If you live in a small town, you probably know each store owner personally and can ask about their orders, shipping time, and other essentials. If you donâ€™t, you can use your own judgmentâ€”check the plastic food packaging for more information or just examine the products themselves. There is no reason to break the bankâ€”theyâ€™re just fruits and vegetablesâ€”but remember that you get what you pay for.

Packaging

Some plastic food packaging protects against damage better than others. Look for packaging that is made out of thermoformed plastic, which is generally sturdy and conforms to the shape of the fruits and vegetables. You can also look for clamshell packaging, which opens and closes on a hinge. This is usually made out of high-grade plastic packaging that wonâ€™t puncture or rupture during shipping.

Texture

Leafy vegetables can wilt quickly, so be sure to pick leaves that can hold up. If itâ€™s remotely soft, donâ€™t buy it. As for fruits, again, the chances are that they were shipped green and couldnâ€™t ripen in the refrigerated containers. Try to find fruit that has at least one ripe spot. For mangoes, this will mean a blush of red or yellow. Grapes can be trickyâ€”especially if theyâ€™re supposed to be greenâ€”so best bet is to just sample one. Youâ€™ll probably find a few opened bags due to the number of customers who did the same thing already. If the grapes are contained in clamshell packaging, this wonâ€™t be as simple, but you can probably ask a compliant sales associate for assistance. Often, stores leave out fruit samples for their customers as well. And remember, fruits like bananas are supposed to be greenâ€”they are always picked greenâ€”so donâ€™t worry about them ripening. When yo bring fruits home, place them in a brown paper bag with an apple (apples have a long shelf life, and

even a mushy apple will work) t speed up the ripening process.

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Jessica Kevinston - About Author:
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Article Keywords:
Plastic packaging, clamshell packaging, plastic food packaging, thermoforme

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