Should I Refrigerate Apples? An A-to-Z Guide to Storing Fruits and Vegetables

Good produce is a gift. Keep it fresh as long as possible with these tips.

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How many cucumbers — pudgy and bright days before — have you pulled from the crisper, riddled with sunken pits? What about the bags of sodden herbs guiltily tossed, after a recipe called for just a few sprigs?

If you're an average American, it's a lot. We waste nearly a pound of food per person every day, affecting our grocery bills and greenhouse gas emissions. Fresh fruits and vegetables make up more than a third of what goes uneaten.

Knowing a little more about your produce will help you eat and love more of it, and keep you from unwittingly speeding it to the trash.

Below you'll find rules of thumb for shopping, storing and making the most of your fruits and vegetables, plus a complete guide to the personalities and preferences of 33 types of produce, from apples to okra to zucchini.

Apples

Look for: Heavy, smooth-skinned, firm specimens.

Store: In a bowl on the counter with breathing room for one to two weeks, or, for longer storage, put them in a breathable bag in the crisper drawer.

Make the most of it: Pull out any apples with cuts or bruises, trim the bad bits and eat the good. Use wrinkly apples for sauce, pies and crisps and firmer ones for snacks and salads. And don't toss the peels! Much of apples' "aroma comes from the skin," the food scientist Harold McGee wrote in "On Food and Cooking," so steep scraps in tea or syrup, blend them into smoothies, float them in your water glass or just snack on them.

Arugula, Lettuce, Spinach & Other Soft Greens

Look for: Vibrant leaves with no wilting, yellowing or swampy smells, and ends that aren't browning.

Store: Wrapped in a damp cloth in a well-sealed container in the fridge. If you have space, greens will last a shockingly long time washed, spun dry and refrigerated directly in the salad spinner.

Make the most of it: Soaking in cold water helps perk up greens and washes away any clinging dirt: Swish them around, let the silt filter to the bottom for a few minutes, then lift the leaves out (repeat, if needed). Or cook wilting leaves into soups and kilt lettuce.

Asparagus

Look For: Tight, firm tops and unshriveled skin. Budding tips are fine, if the stalks look perky and the bottoms aren't dry and reedy, according to Abra Berens, author of the produce guides "Ruffage" and "Pulp."

Store: In the refrigerator for a short stay — either upright in a jar, bottoms drinking up water like flowers, or in a breathable bag in the crisper drawer, cut ends wrapped in a damp paper towel.

Make the most of it: Don't give up on the tough bottoms after snapping or trimming: Slice the more tender end thinly to snack on or add to stir-fries or salads. Or simmer for stocks or blended (and probably strained) soups.

Avocados

Look for: To eat today, they should be firm but yield slightly to gentle pressure (not squeezing), and have no soft spots. To use later in the week, buy them hard and unyielding. Hass, the most common variety, will darken from Kelly green to deep purply black, but other varieties stay green even at peak ripeness.

Store: Loose in the refrigerator, if ripe. On the counter, if unripe. If you want to hurry it along, "the classic 'paper bag with a ripe apple' trick to speed ripening via ethylene is very useful," said Nik Sharma, a molecular biologist and author of "Veg-Table," who has developed recipes for The New York Times.

Make the most of it: Cut avocado turns brown quickly; close it back up with the pit and peel or sprinkle with lemon or lime juice and store in an airtight container in the refrigerator. Scrape off any brown parts and eat the rest (or make guacamole).

Bananas

Look for: Bunches that are greener than you'd like. They'll ripen quickly. If you see plastic wrap on the stem, leave it on, unless you're trying to speed things up (it's there to slow the ethylene release).

Store: In a paper bag on the counter, if you want to ripen them fast. But, to ripen them slowly, leave them on the counter or in a charming banana hanger, to prevent bruising. You can also slow down ripening with a chill in the fridge, or pause the process indefinitely for future baking and smoothie-making, by keeping them in the freezer, chopped or right in their brown, spotty peels.

Make the most of it: The peels are edible, too. Try them in curry, cake, "bacon" or a whole-banana bread.

Beets, Radishes, Rutabagas & Turnips

Look for: Peppy greens and firm roots without cracks, soft spots or lots of hairy secondary roots. If the tops look like they've been cut back repeatedly (sprouts will continue to grow in storage), the root is most likely on the older side.

Store: Lop off the greens, if yours came with them, and store separately in breathable bags in the crisper drawer (for even longer storage, try a paper bag inside a plastic bag to prevent moisture loss). Use the greens within a few days; the roots will last much longer.

Make the most of it: Eat the tops! They can be wilted or creamed like any hardy green. Peel only gnarlier skins. A soak in cool water can revive limp roots and temper spicy ones.

Bell Peppers, Jalapeños & Other Peppers

Look for: Taut, shiny skin with the perkiest green stems you can find. Red peppers should be deep brick red for the most intense flavor.

Store: In a breathable bag in the crisper drawer, ideally not far below 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Green, unripe peppers will last longer than fully ripe red peppers (all peppers start out green, then brighten to yellow, orange, red or purple.)

Make the most of it: Rather than charring and peeling roasted peppers, consider leaving the skins on, especially if they'll be sliced before cooking, as in ratatouille, or to retain structure, as in stuffed peppers.

Blueberries, Blackberries, Raspberries & Strawberries

Look for: Deeply colored berries without shriveling, squish or mold (though it can be hard to tell what's lying underneath the top layer, so make sure to look at the bottom of the basket). Strawberries should have fresh green tops and shiny red skin with no signs of white. Importantly, give them a sniff. "The better they smell, the sweeter they taste," said Hilary Craig, director of produce category management at Misfits Market.

Store: Ideally, store more delicate berries in a single layer in a container with airflow in the refrigerator, or layer dry kitchen towels in between layers (or just plan to use them up quickly). Blueberries will last the longest. Save them for last.

Make the most of it: For the fullest flavor, bring them back up to room temperature before eating. Save green strawberry tops for flavoring drinking water (and don't even bother cutting them off in blended recipes like smoothies or ice pops). Wrinkly or overripe berries are perfect for baking

into cobblers and buckles. If some berries in a container are moldy, no need to toss them all. Fish out any that still look good and relocate them to a clean, dry container A.S.A.P.

Bok Choy, Collards, Kale and Other Sturdy Greens

Look for: Full, stiff leaves with no yellowing, bruising or black spots. Tiny green bugs are fairly common on organic kale and can just be washed away as long as the leaves look good, Ms. Berens said.

Store: Free them of twist-ties and wrap in a damp cloth in a well-sealed container in the crisper. Or prop them up in a glass of water on the counter, like flowers.

Make the most of it: Limp greens will perk up with a short soak in cold water for salads. And if a recipe tells you to strip out the stems, you can just chop them finely and start them cooking a little earlier than the leaves in braises or pasta sauce.

Broccoli

Look for: Dense, tightly packed florets with no signs of yellowing or flowering. Purple-hued crowns result from cold snaps, which are "actually thought to make the florets slightly sweeter," Ms. Craig said.

Store: In a breathable bag in the crisper drawer.

Make the most of it: If it's gone limp, give it a hydrating soak in an ice bath, then drain. (If roasting, pat or spin it dry, too.) Don't miss the stalks: Peel the tougher skin, then grate them for slaws or slice thinly for roasting or stir-frying.

Carrots

Look for: Rigid, deeply colored roots and voluptuous green tops. Older-looking carrots with little green sprouts at the top are trying to send up a new stem and may have a woodier core, which can be trimmed or strained away, Ms. Berens said.

Store: In a breathable bag in the crisper drawer. Cut off the greens and store in a separate bag, or they'll wick moisture from the roots.

Make the most of it: There's no need to peel, unless the skins are especially tough — just give them a good scrub. Limp carrots and cut carrots (including baby nubbins in a bag) that turn ashen are simply dehydrated: Soak them in ice water for an hour to revive them. Use leafy tops in pestos, oils or anywhere you'd want fresh, grassy herbs.

Cauliflower

Look for: Dense, tightly packed crowns, ideally with fresh green leaves. Aim for heads with few or no brown spots. They're fine to eat, but are a clue to their age. A yellow tint (from the sun) is perfectly fine.

Store: In a breathable bag in the crisper drawer.

Make the most of it: Cauliflower cores and leaves are edible, too. They roast, blend and bathe in cream just as well as the rest.

Cherries, Peaches, Plums and Other Stone Fruit

Look for: Good smells, taut skins and warmer undertones in color. Since they'll ripen more at home, feel free to buy on the firmer side. Don't worry about a dusty bloom on plums' skin: It means they were picked recently. Cherries are usually sold ripe since they're shaken out of the tree all at once. They should also be shiny and without signs of cracks or mold around the stem. Darker colored varieties will have more complex flavors; lighter colors will taste more sweet.

Store: On the counter, out of the sun and not touching one another, until they're ripe, then into the fridge in an open paper bag with nothing stacked on top. Since cherries are usually sold

ripe, they can go right into the fridge in a breathable bag.

Make the most of it: Trim out any bruises and eat the rest. Whole pits will infuse sweet flavor into water, dairy, liquor or syrup; the inner kernel can be harvested to make the bitter-almond flavored noyaux (use a trusted recipe source, as they contain trace amounts of a precursor to cyanide). Make spicy fruit salad, cocktails and Pavlova and, especially, torte.

Corn

Look for: Corn in green husks with fresh-looking silk tassels and plump kernels (peel back the top just a bit to peek).

Store: For only a short while, since corn's sugars quickly convert to starch. Keep cobs in the husks in a warmer, higher section of the refrigerator (if husked, wrap in damp cloth in a sealed container).

Make the most of it: When shearing corn from the cobs, you can also scrape the cobs with the back of your knife to coax out more of the flavorful milk and pulp. Simmer the cobs for stock for chowder or risotto. Steep the silk for tea. Wrap the husks around fresh corn uchepos.

Cucumbers

Look for: Rigid, unpitted, unwrinkled skin. A pale spot is fine (where the sun couldn't reach to develop the chlorophyll); widespread yellowing is a sign of age and is not fine.

Store: In a cool spot on the counter or wrapped in a damp cloth, in a breathable bag in the crisper drawer and use them quickly (longer and they'll start to get pitted skin from chilling injury).

Make the most of it: Pickles! If overripe and bitter, try scooping out the seeds.

Eggplant

Look for: Plump bodies and taut, glossy skin, with no wrinkles or craters. Larger eggplants will most likely have larger seeds and more bitterness.

Store: Ideally, a cool, dark spot at room temperature, since fridge temperatures lead quickly to deterioration (you'll notice browning and pitting).

Make the most of it: There's no need to salt and drain eggplant ahead, according to Ms. Berens. For the best flavor and texture, be generous with oil and cook until the flesh is golden brown and coat in a gochujang glaze.

Fennel

Look for: Tight, firm bulbs and perky green fronds.

Store: Separate the bulb from the fronds and store in breathable bags in the crisper.

Make the most of it: If the outer petals are slightly bruised, they're fine to eat, but compost any that have gashes. Slice the stalks thinly and eat them as you would the bulb, or cook them into soups. The fronds can be mixed into green salads or used in place of any soft green herb.

Figs

Look for: Soft, sweet-smelling fruit. Tears in the delicate flesh are OK, as long as the figs don't smell fermented, according to Russ Parsons, author of "How to Pick a Peach."

Store: In the fridge, in a single layer in a cloth-lined container, left partly ajar for airflow (and not for long).

Make the most of it: If they're softer than you'd like but still smell good, cook them into a jam, or macerate with a little sugar (liquor optional) to bring out their saucy side.

Garlic, Onions and Shallots

Look for: Firm bulbs that don't give or collapse when you gently squeeze them.

Store: Store whole in their peels in a well-ventilated basket in a cool, dark, dry place. Notice any whiffs of bad smells and remove the offenders before they affect the rest. Don't store onions near potatoes, since they'll nudge each other toward decay. Sweet onions should be stored in a breathable bag in the crisper: They have more water (though not more sugar), so are more vulnerable.

Make the most of it: Some chefs say garlic sprouts are bitter and should be removed, but taste one and see if you agree. Garlic, onion and shallot sprouts are all edible. Garlic cloves and the root end of any onion can be planted.

Ginger

Look for: Smooth, unwrinkled knobs.

Store: In the crisper drawer in a sealed container or, longer term, in the freezer, which will soften the ginger's fibers and make it easier to grate as needed (no need to thaw first).

Make the most of it: Other than the occasional tougher nub, there's generally no need to peel ginger. Any trimmings and peels can go into spicy ginger tea.

Grapes

Look for: Tight, heavy bunches with no wrinkled skins. Firm, green (not brown) stems.

Store: On their stems in a breathable bag in the refrigerator. Prune out any broken or brown grapes to protect the rest and, if there's moisture in the bag, tuck in a paper towel.

Make the most of it: If a few grapes are moldy or collapsing, scuttle them out quickly. The rest of the bunch is fine. A coat of powdery white isn't mold: It protects grapes from moisture loss and is fine to eat. For grapes you won't get to in time, freeze in an airtight container for snacking, plucked or on the vine. If they start to wrinkle, roast them.

Herbs

Look for: Vivid color with no wilting or blackening.

Store: Delicate herbs that come with stems (cilantro, parsley, dill, mint) will keep longest stored in a jar with their trimmed bottoms dangling in water, like flowers, with a plastic bag loosely draped over them to trap moisture (change the water every few days, or when you notice it darkening). Basil likes the water vase setup, too, but leave it on the counter since it'll turn black in the fridge. Hardier herbs (rosemary, thyme, sage, oregano) are fine loosely wrapped in a damp cloth in a breathable bag in the crisper drawer..

Make the most of it: Eat green salads that are more herbs than greens, including the tender stems. Blend into oils (keep in the fridge and toss after four days). Or pack extra chopped herbs into ice cube trays, cover with olive oil and freeze, then pop the cubes into an airtight container in the freezer to jump-start future cooking.

Lemons, Limes, Oranges and Other Citrus

Look for: Heavy, fragrant fruit with no soft spots. A green tinge on oranges doesn't mean they're less ripe (or delicious). It happens when the tree blossoms again while ripe fruit are on the tree, according to Mr. Parsons.

Store: On the counter, freed from bags, is fine. But they'll last much longer in the fridge (loose in a crisper drawer works).

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Make the most of it: Every part of citrus — juice, zest, even whole — freezes well, though the whole texture will be softer and juicier. Or try whole citrus recipes like dressings, snack cakes or tarts.

Mangoes

Look for: Don't worry about the color. Since they'll continue to ripen on the counter, you're mostly making sure they're not squishy-soft or bruised. When ripe, mangoes will have a floral, fruity scent near the stem end, like other ripe climacteric fruits (peaches, pears, tomatoes). If there's little aroma, they probably need time at room temp.

Store: On the counter until ripe, then loose on a refrigerator shelf or in the crisper drawer if needed (or better yet, just eat it).

Make the most of it: Crunchy green mango is for salads. Overripe, mushy mangoes are for chutneys, loaf cakes and mangonadas, as long as their flavor is still bright.

Mushrooms

Look for: Smooth, glossy caps with no wrinkling and minimal bruising. Any damaged flesh breaks down very quickly, according to Mr. Parsons.

Store: In the original packaging or decanted into a paper bag on the lower shelf in the refrigerator to keep moisture from settling on mushrooms' sensitive skin (and to prevent drying out).

Make the most of it: If the stems are tender and not woody, you can eat them, in stews and sheet-pan dinners. And, contrary to lore, you can wash dirty mushrooms — do it just before cooking and dry them well.

Okra

Look for: Brightly colored okra with no yellowing or dark spots. Squeeze lightly to check that they're firm and not mushy.

Store: In a breathable bag in a warmer part of the fridge, short term (they're prone to chilling injury).

Make the most of it: Ms. Henderson's favorite way to minimize okra's slickness is to simply slice it in half lengthwise, sear cut side-down in a hot, oiled skillet and sprinkle with salt. Or there's sinigangor gumbo or bhindi masala.

Pears

Look for: Firm or slightly soft. They'll ripen well at home. (In fact, Mr. Parsons says they're always picked hard because they ripen from the inside out. If farmers waited until they were ripe on the surface, inside they'd be mush.) Most varieties' color changes very little as they ripen.

Store: On the counter until they're as soft as you'd like when pressed near the stem, then into the fridge in an open paper bag.

Make the most of it: Overripe or dinged pears can still be cooked into pancakes, crumble bars, or roasted squash soup.

Potatoes

Look for: Very firm flesh with no nicks, sprouts or green skin.

Store: In a well-ventilated basket in a cool, dark place, away from onions — they're bad influences on each other. Heed any funky scents or brown liquid pooling at the bottom and remove problematic potatoes right away.

Make the most of it: Compost or deeply peel any with greening skins (these come from exposure to sun or artificial light and are toxic in large

amounts); any other sprouts or unsavory bits can be trimmed away with a paring knife, as long as the rest of the potato is firm. Repurpose potato cooking water in yeast breads and the gravy and stuffing at Thanksgiving.

Pumpkin, Butternut and Other Hard Squash

Look for: Heavy, hard-skinned specimens without soft spots or other wounds, or unusual round markings (a virus). If they're missing the stem, plan to use them quickly.

Store: Loose in a cool, dark place.

Make the most of it: Most hard squash skins are edible and delicious roasted, pressed against the hot pan, Ottolenghi-style. For golden roasted seeds, Ms. Berens leaves in the seeds when roasting squash, then scoops them out, pulling away any stringy bits. She then tosses the seeds with olive oil and spices, and roasts them right away.

Rhubarb

Look for: Sturdy stalks with no puckering or divots. Some will be flaming red; some will be green, depending on variety, not ripeness. (But the redder the stalks, the more vividly colored the final dish.)

Store: Cut away and compost the leaves before storing. Do *not* eat them: They are poisonous. Wrap the stalks well in paper and store in the fridge to avoid moisture loss.

Make the most of it: It's not all pie: Shave it raw into salads, roast it, stew it, pickle it or make rhubarb-ade.

Sweet Potatoes

Look for: Very firm bodies with no cuts or holes in the skin. Marred potatoes will deteriorate faster. Varieties range in flavor, color (from white to orange to glowing purple, inside and out) and moltenness when cooked. Try roasting a few at once to compare.

Store: In a well-ventilated basket in a cool, dark place.

Make the most of it: The skins are edible and, when roasted, crackly and delicious.

Tomatoes

Look for: Heavy, sweet-smelling orbs with taut skin (don't squeeze or you'll bruise them). Otherwise, great tomatoes with small dings are fine, but trim them out and eat quickly.

Store: Lined up on the counter, stem side down, and out of the sun. Avoid storing in the fridge if possible to protect the flavor and texture, but if you're not going to get to them in time, the fridge can buy you a few days. Bring them to room temperature before eating (or cook them).

Make the most of it: Freeze them whole for sauces, blended salsas and stews, where stand-up texture is irrelevant. The seeds, juice and skins have loads of flavor — eat them if you can.

Zucchini and Other Summer Squash

Look for: Modestly sized squash free of dents and wrinkles. Tiny, prickly hairs mean the squash has just been picked and will rub right off when rinsing. Most summer squash should be deeply colored, but straight-neck and crookneck should be pale. Once their skin is golden, they'll be hard and warty, according to Mr. Parsons.

Store: In a breathable bag in the crisper drawer. To keep cut ends from drying out, wrap them in a damp cloth.

Make the most of it: Marinate, stuff or pancake them**.** Grate overgrown or limp squash into muffins and other quick breads (the grated squash can also be frozen for future muffins).

Some Key Tips for Extending the Life of Your Produce

- **Look for vegetables and fruit that appear fresh and delicious now:** Most are as ripe as they're going to get. But there are some exceptions. Climacteric produce — apples, avocados, bananas, mangoes, peaches and other stone fruit, pears and tomatoes — can be bought unripe and left to ripen.

- **Look out for ethylene:** As these climacteric fruits and vegetables soften and grow more aromatic, they unleash the plant hormone ethylene, which speeds up the ripening process. Ethylene gasses can also push other fruits and vegetables over the edge. One easy-to-remember solution is to store fruits in one crisper drawer and vegetables in the other, to prevent your ripe apples and mangoes from turning your carrots soapy and spinach yellow and limp.

- **"Keep it alive as long as possible,"** said Bárbara Blanco-Ulate, a director of the University of California Postharvest Research and Extension Center. Even after picking, the cells of fruits and vegetables continue to breathe in oxygen and out carbon dioxide and moisture. But it's a bit of a Goldilocks situation. Too much oxygen and they'll respire (and fade) faster; cut it off and they'll ferment, Dr. Blanco-Ulate said. They also need an environment humid enough where they won't wilt, but dry enough that no moisture collects on their skin, an invitation for spoilage microbes to run wild. For most refrigerated produce, a breathable container that holds onto humidity is the answer, like the perforated bags and containers they may be sold in; a reusable bag or wrap made from beeswax, cloth or silicone; or a paper bag tucked into a loosely sealed plastic bag.

More Tips for Keeping Fruits and Vegetables Fresher, Longer

- ***Buy local.*** *Shop at farmers' markets or C.S.A.s when you can: The produce will be the freshest and least-traveled, and, in boom seasons, cheaper.*

- ***Shop strategically at the grocery store.*** *Notice where and how produce is stored — in refrigerated cases or room-temperature bins — so you can follow suit at home. If the front row looks suspect, aim for the back, where the newer goods are cycled in.*

- ***Keep frozen fruits and vegetables on hand.*** *Knowing you can fall back on them can keep you from buying more fresh produce than you'll realistically eat, said Dana Gunders, author of "Waste-Free Kitchen Handbook" and president of the food waste nonprofit ReFED.*

- ***Wash produce only just before cooking, or spin it dry well.*** *Any lingering surface moisture will feed microbes and speed up spoilage.*

- ***Do what works for you.*** *Though most produce is technically suited for the humidity-controlled crispers at the bottom of the fridge, "I don't necessarily subscribe to that idea, because out of sight is out of mind," said Helene Henderson, chef and founder of Malibu Farm restaurants. (If you opt for higher shelves or door pockets for perishables, the crispers can instead be used for jars of mustard*