



Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Handling Guidelines for Food Pantries

Fact Sheet FS1139



Cooperative Extension

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Follow these guidelines to make sure donations of fresh produce stay safe.

Food Quality and Safety

Food distributed to clients must be safe and of good quality. Good quality food tastes, smells, looks good, and is often more nutritious. Safety means the food will not make anyone sick. The goal of proper food handling is to provide both safe and good quality foods.

Fresh produce quality and safety depends on: the conditions at harvest, length of time since harvest, the temperature at which the produce has been held, the way the food is transported, and the length of storage. For example, fresh picked corn will store longer and taste better than corn that was picked four days ago. Overripe or bruised fruit may not look good, but it may still be safe.

Keep It Clean

Germs or bacteria can get into food during handling. Keep hands, work surfaces, utensils, and the refrigerator clean. Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds to remove germs or bacteria before handling fresh produce. This can greatly reduce the risk of food poisoning. Watch out for cross contamination. Never handle raw meat before fresh produce without washing hands and disinfecting work surfaces first.

Handling Fresh Produce Deliveries

1. After receiving, sort fresh fruit and vegetables by quality and level of ripeness.
 - Fully ripe and over-ripe produce should be used first.
 - Discard moldy produce and anything badly bruised or with large soft spots.
 - Produce with some spots, soft areas or bruises is generally safe to use.
2. Do not wash produce. Washing introduces extra moisture that can cause spoilage.
3. Follow the "First In, First Out" (FIFO) rule. This means you use the oldest produce first. Labeling produce with delivery dates will help with FIFO.

Distribution

- If repackaging, use clean food boxes, storage bags or plastic wrap. Leave the opening loose so as not to trap extra moisture.
- Tell clients or agencies to wash produce prior to use under running water and scrub with clean hands or a clean brush. Do not soak produce in water since this increases chances of cross-contamination. Dry the washed produce with clean paper towels or air dry. Do not use cloth towels since they can cause contamination.

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Refrigerator Tips

- Keep the temperature between 34°F and 40°F. Keep a thermometer in the refrigerator and check it daily.
- Open the door as little as possible. Every time the door opens, warm air enters which can raise the temperature of the refrigerator and lower food quality. It also increases electricity costs.
- Keep any raw meat, poultry, or fish on a tray on the lowest shelf in the refrigerator and away from fresh produce. This will prevent meats from dripping and contaminating the produce.

Holding Produce at Room Temperature

- Some fruits and vegetables can be stored at room temperature, at least until ripe. These include apples, apricots, avocados, bananas, cantaloupes, cassava (yucca), honeydew melons, kiwifruit, mangoes, nectarines, peaches, pears, plum, tomatoes, watermelon, winter squash, pumpkin, white potatoes, sweet potatoes and onions. Most of these can be stored at 55-65°F for extended periods (up to 10 days).
- Produce that can be stored at 45-50°F include basil, snap beans, cucumber, eggplant, okra, peppers, summer squash, grapefruit, lemons, limes, oranges, pineapples, and tomatillo. It is best if they are not stored in a closed room without ventilation since a gas (ethylene) will develop and ripen the produce faster.

- When holding produce at room temperature, the relative humidity of the room is important. The lower the relative humidity the greater the water loss from produce, and the lower the final quality. Most produce should be held at 85-95% relative humidity.

Refrigerate Produce After Cutting

Cut or sliced fruits and vegetables must always be refrigerated for food safety.

Summary

- Keep everything clean – hands, work surfaces, packaging and produce.
- Sort produce by ripeness and quality. Discard when necessary.
- Distribute produce using FIFO: first in, first out.
- Store at room temperature or in a refrigerator, as appropriate.

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