



## A Consumer's Guide to Fresh Fruit

### Apples

The many varieties of apples differ widely in appearance, flesh characteristics, seasonal availability, and suitability for different uses.

For good eating as fresh fruit, the commonly available varieties are: Red Delicious, McIntosh, Granny Smith, Empire, and Golden Delicious. For making pies and applesauce, use tart or slightly acid varieties such as Gravenstein, Grimes Golden, Jonathan, and Newtown.

For baking, the firmer fleshed varieties -- Rome Beauty, Northern Spy, Rhode Island Greening, Winesap, and York Imperial -- are widely used.

**Look for:** Firm, crisp, well-colored apples. Flavor varies in apples, and depends on the stage of maturity at the time that the fruit is picked. Apples must be mature when picked to have a good flavor, texture, and storing ability. Immature apples lack color and are usually poor in flavor. They may have a shriveled appearance after being held in storage.

Most apples are marketed by grade, and consumer packages show the variety, the grade, and the size. U.S. grades for apples are: U.S. Extra Fancy, U.S. Fancy, U.S. No. 1, and combinations of these grades. U.S. Utility is a less desirable grade. Apples from the far Western States are usually marketed under State grades which are similar to the U.S. grades.

**Avoid:** Overripe apples (indicated by a yielding to slight pressure on the skin, and soft, mealy flesh) and apples affected by freeze (indicated by internal breakdown and bruised areas). Scald on apples (irregularly shaped tan or brown areas) may not seriously affect the taste.

### Apricots

Most fresh apricots are marketed in June and July, but a limited supply of imported apricots is available in large cities during December and January. Domestic apricots are grown principally in California, Washington, and Utah.

Apricots develop their flavor and sweetness on the tree, and should be mature but firm at the time that they are picked.

**Look for:** Apricots that are plump and juicy looking, with a uniform, golden-orange color. Ripe apricots will yield to gentle pressure on the skin.

**Avoid:** Dull-looking, soft, or mushy fruit, and very firm, pale yellow, or greenish-yellow fruit. These indicate overmaturity or immaturity, respectively.

## **Avocados**

Avocados, grown in California and Florida, are available all year. Two general types, and a number of varieties of each, are grown. Depending upon type and variety, avocados vary greatly in shape, size, and color. Most tend to be pear-shaped, but some are almost spherical. Fruits weighing under 1/2 pound are most commonly available. Some have rough or leathery textured skin, while others have smooth skin. The skin color of most varieties is some shade of green, but certain varieties turn maroon, brown, or purplish-black as they ripen.

Despite this variation in appearance, avocados are of good eating quality when they are properly ripened, becoming slightly soft. This ripening process normally takes from 3 to 5 days at room temperature for the quite firm avocados usually found in food stores. Ripening can be slowed by refrigeration.

**Look for:** For immediate use, select slightly soft avocados which yield to gentle pressure on the skin. For use in a few days, buy firm fruits that do not yield to the squeeze test. Leave them at room temperature to ripen.

Irregular light-brown markings are sometimes found on the outside skin. These markings generally have no effect on the flesh of the avocado.

**Avoid:** Avocados with dark sunken spots in irregular patches or cracked or broken surfaces. These are signs of decay.

**An extra tip:** When preparing avocados, to avoid the browning of avocado flesh when exposed to air, immediately place the peeled fruit in lemon juice until ready for use.

## **Bananas**

Unlike most other fruits, bananas develop their best eating quality after they are harvested. This allows bananas to be shipped great distances. Almost our entire

supply of bananas, available year-round, is imported from Central and South America. Bananas are sensitive to cool temperatures and will be injured in temperatures below 55 °F. For this reason, they should never be kept in the refrigerator. The ideal temperature for ripening bananas is between 60 and 70 °F. Higher temperatures cause them to ripen too rapidly.

**Look for:** Bananas which are firm, bright in appearance, and free from bruises or other injury. The state of ripeness is indicated by skin color. Best eating quality has been reached when the solid yellow color is specked with brown. At this stage, the flesh is mellow and the flavor is fully developed. Bananas with green tips or with practically no yellow color have not developed their full flavor potential.

**Avoid:** Bruised fruit (indicating rapid deterioration and waste); discolored skins (a sign of decay); a dull, grayish, aged appearance (showing that the bananas have been exposed to cold and will not ripen properly).

Occasionally, the skin may be entirely brown and yet the flesh will still be in prime condition.

## **Blueberries**

Fresh blueberries are on the market from May through September. Generally, the large berries are cultivated varieties and the smaller berries are wild varieties.

**Look for:** A dark blue color with a silvery bloom is the best indication of quality. This silvery bloom is a natural, protective, waxy coating. Buy blueberries that are plump, firm, uniform in size, dry, and free from stems or leaves.

**Avoid:** Soft, mushy, or leaking berries.

## **Cherries**

Excellent as dessert fruit, most sweet cherries found in the food store are produced in the Western States and are available from May through August. Red tart cherries, also called sour or pie cherries and used mainly in cooked desserts, have a softer flesh, lighter red color, and a tart flavor. They generally are shipped to processing plants and are sold frozen or canned.

**Look for:** A very dark color is your most important indication of good flavor and maturity in sweet cherries. Bing, Black Tartarian, Schmidt, Chapman, and Republican varieties should range from deep maroon or mahogany red to black for richest flavor. Lambert cherries should be dark red. Rainier cherries should be straw-colored. Good cherries have bright, glossy, plump-looking surfaces and fresh-looking stems.

**Avoid:** Overmature cherries lacking in flavor, indicated by shrivelling, dried stems, and a generally dull appearance. Decay is fairly common at times on sweet cherries, but because of the normal dark color, decayed areas are often inconspicuous. Soft, leaking flesh, brown discoloration, and mold growth are indications of decay.

## **Cranberries**

A number of varieties of fresh cranberries are marketed in large volume from September through January. They differ considerably in size and color, but are not identified by variety names in your food store.

**Look for:** Plump, firm berries with a lustrous color provide the best quality. Duller varieties should at least have some red color.

**Avoid:** Brown or dark, discolored berries and soft, spongy, or leaky berries should be sorted out before cooking, because they may produce an off-flavor.

## **Grapefruit**

Grapefruit is available all year, with most abundant supplies from January through May. While Florida is the major source of fresh grapefruit, there also is substantial production in Texas, California, and Arizona. Several varieties are marketed, but the principal distinction at retail is between those which are "seedless" (having few or no seeds) and the "seeded" type. Another distinction is color of flesh. Pink- or red-fleshed fruit is most common, but white-fleshed varieties are also available.

Grapefruit is picked "tree ripe" and is ready to eat when you buy it in the store.

**Look for:** Firm fruits, heavy for their size, are usually the best eating. Thin-skinned fruits have more juice than coarse-skinned ones. If a grapefruit is pointed at the stem end, it is likely to be thick-skinned. Rough, ridged, or wrinkled skin can also be an indication of thick skin, pulpiness, and lack of juice.

Grapefruit often have skin defects such as scale, scars, thorn scratches, or discoloration. This usually does not affect how the fruit tastes.

**Avoid:** Soft, water-soaked areas, lack of bright color, and soft, tender peel that breaks easily with finger pressure are symptoms of decay.

## **Grapes**

Most table grapes available in food stores are of the European type, grown principally in California and Arizona. Only small quantities of Eastern-grown American-type grapes are sold for table use.

European types are firm-fleshed and generally have high sugar content. Common varieties are Thompson seedless (an early, green grape), Red seedless (an early, red grape), Tokay and Cardinal (early, bright-red, seeded grapes), and Emperor (late, deep-red, seeded grapes). These all have excellent flavor when well-matured.

American-type grapes have softer flesh and are juicier than European types. The outstanding variety for flavor is the Concord, which is blue-black when fully matured. Delaware and Catawba are also popular.

**Look for:** Well-colored, plump grapes that are firmly attached to the stem. White or green grapes are sweetest when the color has a yellowish cast or straw color, with a tinge of amber. Red varieties are better when good red predominates on all or most of the berries. Bunches are more likely to hold together if the stems are predominantly green and pliable.

**Avoid:** Soft or wrinkled grapes, or bunches of grapes with stems that are brown and brittle; these are the effects of freezing or drying. Also avoid grapes with bleached areas around the stem ends (indicating injury and poor quality), and leaking berries (a sign of decay).

## **Kiwifruit**

The kiwifruit is a relatively small, ellipsoid-shaped fruit with a bright green, slightly acid-tasting pulp surrounding many small, black, edible seeds, which in turn surround a pale heart. The exterior of the kiwifruit is unappealing to some, being somewhat "furry" and light to medium brown in color. (While the furry skin is edible, some prefer to peel the fruit before eating.) Domestic kiwifruit is produced primarily in California, but imported kiwifruit is also commonly marketed.

**Look for:** Plump, unwrinkled fruit, either firm or slightly yielding. Kiwifruit is fully ripe when it is yielding to the touch but not soft. Firm kiwifruit can be ripened at home in a few days by leaving it at room temperature. Use of a ripening bag or bowl will speed the process.

**Avoid:** Fruit that shows signs of shriveling, mold, or excessive softening, all of which indicate spoilage. Some kiwifruit may appear to have a "water-stained" exterior. This is perfectly normal for the fruit and does not affect interior quality in any way.

**Note:** Kiwifruit contains an enzyme, actinidin, similar to papain in papayas, that reacts chemically to break down proteins. (It has been used as a "secret ingredient" to tenderize meat.) Actinidin prevents gelatin from setting, so if you are going to serve kiwifruit in a gelatin dish, cook the fruit for a few minutes before adding it to the gelatin.

## Lemons

Most of the Nation's commercial lemon supply comes from California and Arizona, and is available year-round.

**Look for:** Lemons with a rich yellow color, reasonably smooth-textured skin with a slight gloss, and those which are firm and heavy. A pale or greenish-yellow color means very fresh fruit with slightly higher acidity. Coarse or rough skin texture is a sign of thick skin and not much flesh.

**Avoid:** Lemons with a darker yellow or dull color, or with hardened or shriveled skin (signs of age), and those with soft spots, mold on the surface, and punctures of the skin (signs of decay).

## Limes

Most limes sold at retail are produced in Florida or imported from Mexico, and are marketed when mature. Imported limes are mostly the smaller "seeded" lime.

**Look for:** Limes with glossy skin and heavy weight for the size.

**Avoid:** Limes with dull, dry skin (a sign of aging and loss of acid flavor), and those showing evidence of decay (soft spots, mold, and skin punctures.)

## Melons

Selection of melons for quality and flavor is difficult, challenging the skill of even the most experienced buyer. Although no absolute formula exists, considering several factors when judging a melon will increase the likelihood of success.

### Cantaloupe (Muskmelons)

Cantaloupe, generally available from May through September, are produced principally in California, Arizona, and Texas. Some are also imported early in the season.

**Look for:** There are three major signs of full maturity. First, the stem should be gone, leaving a smooth symmetrical, shallow base called a "full slip." If all or part of the stem base remains, or if the stem scar is jagged or torn, the melon is probably not fully matured. Second, the netting, or veining, should be thick, coarse, and corky, and should stand out in bold relief over some part of the surface. Third, the skin color (ground color) between the netting should have changed from green to yellowish-buff, yellowish-gray, or pale yellow.

**Signs of ripeness:** A cantaloupe might be mature, but not ripe. A ripe cantaloupe will have a yellowish cast to the rind, have a pleasant cantaloupe

aroma, and yield slightly to light thumb pressure on the blossom end of the melon.

Most cantaloupe are quite firm when freshly displayed in retail stores. While some may be ripe, most have not yet reached their best eating stage. Hold them for 2 to 4 days at room temperature to allow completion of ripening. After conditioning the melons, some people like to place them in the refrigerator for a few hours before serving.

**Avoid:** Overripeness is indicated by a pronounced yellow rind color, a softening over the entire rind, and soft, watery, and insipid flesh. Small bruises normally will not hurt the fruit, but large bruised areas should be avoided, since they generally cause soft, water-soaked areas underneath the rind. Mold growth on the cantaloupe (particularly in the stem scar, or if the tissue under the mold is soft and wet) is a sign of decay.

## **Casaba**

This sweet, juicy melon is normally pumpkin-shaped with a very slight tendency to be pointed at the stem end. It is not netted, but has shallow, irregular furrows running from the stem end toward the blossom end. The rind is hard with light green or yellow color. The stem does not separate from the melon, and must be cut in harvesting. The casaba melon season is from July to November. Casabas are produced in California and Arizona.

**Look for:** Ripe melons with a gold-yellow rind color and a slight softening at the blossom end. Casabas have no aroma.

**Avoid:** Dark, sunken, water-soaked spots which indicate decay.

## **Crenshaw**

Its large size and distinctive shape make this melon easy to identify. It is rounded at the blossom end and tends to be pointed at the stem end. The rind is relatively smooth with only very shallow lengthwise furrowing. The flesh is pale orange, juicy, and delicious; and generally considered outstanding in the melon family. Crenshaws are grown in California from July through October, with peak shipments in August and September.

**Look for:** There are three signs of ripeness. First, the rind should be generally a deep golden yellow, sometimes with small areas having a lighter shade of yellow. Second, the surface should yield slightly to moderate pressure, particularly at the blossom end. Third, the melon should have a pleasant aroma.

**Avoid:** Slightly sunken, water-soaked areas on the rind are signs of decay.

## Honey Ball

The honey ball melon is very similar to the honey dew melon, except that it is much smaller, very round, and slightly and irregularly netted over the surface. Use the same buying tips for this melon as for the honey dew melon.

## Honey Dew

The outstanding flavor characteristics of honey dews make them highly prized as a dessert fruit. The melon is large (4 to 8 lb.), bluntly oval in shape, and generally very smooth with only occasional traces of surface netting. The rind is firm and ranges from creamy white to creamy yellow, depending on the stage of ripeness. The stem does not separate from the fruit, and must be cut for harvesting.

Honey dews are available to some extent almost all year round, due in part to imports during the winter and spring. Chief sources, however, are California, Arizona, and Texas. The most abundant supplies are available from July through October.

**Look for:** A soft, velvety texture indicates maturity. Slight softening at the blossom end, a faint pleasant fruit aroma, and yellowish-white to creamy rind color indicate ripeness.

**Avoid:** Dead-white or greenish-white color and a hard, smooth feel are signs of immaturity. Large, water-soaked, bruised areas are signs of injury; and cuts or punctures through the rind usually lead to decay. Small, superficial, sunken spots do not damage the melon for immediate use, but large decayed spots will.

## Persian

Persian melons resemble cantaloupe, but are more nearly round, have finer netting, and are about the same size as honey dews. The flesh is thick, fine-textured, and orange-colored. Grown primarily in California, they are available in fair supply in August and September.

**Look for:** The same quality and ripeness factors listed for cantaloupe apply to Persian melons.

## Watermelons

Although watermelons are available to some degree from early May through September, peak supplies come in June, July, and August. Judging the quality of a watermelon is very difficult unless it is cut in half or quartered.

**Look for:** Firm, juicy flesh with good red color that is free from white streaks; and seeds which are dark brown or black. Seedless watermelons often contain small white, immature seeds, which are normal for this type.

**Avoid:** Melons with pale-colored flesh, white streaks (or "white heart"), and whitish seeds (indicating immaturity). Dry, mealy flesh, or watery stringy flesh are signs of overmaturity or aging after harvest.

If you want to buy an uncut watermelon, here are a few appearance factors which may be helpful (though not totally reliable) in guiding you to a satisfactory selection. The watermelon surface should be relatively smooth; the rind should have a slight dullness (neither shiny nor dull); the ends of the melon should be filled out and rounded; and the underside, or "belly" of the melon should have a creamy color.

## **Nectarines**

This fruit, available from June through September from California, combines characteristics of both the peach and the plum.

**Look for:** Rich color and plumpness, and a slight softening along the "seam" of the nectarine. Most varieties have an orange-yellow background color between the red areas, but some varieties have a greenish background color. Bright-looking fruits which are firm to moderately hard will probably ripen normally within 2 or 3 days at room temperature.

**Avoid:** Hard, dull fruits or slightly shriveled fruits (which may be immature -- picked too soon -- and of poor eating quality) and soft or overripe fruits or those with cracked or punctured skin or other signs of decay.

Russetting or staining of the skin may affect the appearance but not detract from the internal quality of the nectarine.

## **Oranges**

California, Florida, Texas, and Arizona produce our year-round supply of oranges.

Leading varieties from California and Arizona are the Washington Navel and the Valencia, both characterized by a rich orange skin color. The Navel orange, available from November until early May, has a thicker, somewhat more pebbled skin than the Valencia; the skin is more easily removed by hand, and the segments separate more readily. It is ideally suited for eating as a whole fruit or in segments in salads. The western Valencia orange, available from late April through October, is excellent either for juicing or for slicing in salads.

Florida and Texas orange crops are marketed from early October until late June. Parson Brown and Hamlin are early varieties, while the Pineapple orange -- an important, high-quality orange for eating -- is available from late November through March. Florida and Texas Valencias are marketed from late March through June. The Florida Temple orange is available from early December until early March. Somewhat like the California Navel, it peels easily, separates into segments readily, and has excellent flavor.

Oranges are required by strict State regulations to be mature before being harvested and shipped out of the producing State. Thus, skin color is not a reliable index of quality, and a greenish cast or green spots do not mean that the orange is immature. Often fully matured oranges will turn greenish (called "regreening") late in the marketing season. Some oranges are artificially colored to improve their appearance. This practice has no effect on eating quality, but artificially colored fruits must be labeled "color added."

"Discoloration" is often found on Florida and Texas oranges, but not on California oranges. This is a tan, brown, or blackish mottling or specking over the skin. It has no effect on eating quality, and in fact often occurs on oranges with thin skin and superior eating quality.

**Look for:** Firm and heavy oranges with fresh, bright-looking skin which is reasonably smooth for the variety.

**Avoid:** Light-weight oranges, which are likely to lack flesh content and juice. Very rough skin texture indicates abnormally thick skin and less flesh. Dull, dry skin and spongy texture indicate aging and deteriorated eating quality. Also avoid decay -- shown by cuts or skin punctures, soft spots on the surface, and discolored, weakened areas of skin around the stem end or button.

## **Peaches**

A great many varieties of peaches are grown, but only an expert can distinguish one from another. These varieties, available May to November, fall into two general types: freestone (flesh readily separates from the pit) and clingstone (flesh clings tightly to the pit). Freestones are usually preferred for eating fresh or for freezing, while clingstones are used primarily for canning, although they are sometimes sold fresh.

**Look for:** Peaches which are fairly firm or becoming a trifle soft. The skin color between the red areas (ground color) should be yellow or at least creamy.

**Avoid:** Very firm or hard peaches with a distinctly green ground color, which are probably immature and won't ripen properly. Also avoid very soft fruits which are overripe. Don't buy peaches with large flattened bruises (they'll have large areas

of discolored flesh underneath) or peaches with any sign of decay. Decay starts as a pale tan spot which expands in a circle and gradually turns darker in color.

## **Pears**

The most popular variety of pear is the Bartlett, which is produced in great quantities (in California, Washington, and Oregon) both for canning and for sale as a fresh fruit. With the aid of cold storage, Bartlett pears are available from early August through November.

Several fall and winter varieties of pears are grown in Washington, Oregon, and California, and shipped to fresh fruit markets. These varieties -- Anjou, Bosc, Winter Nellis, and Comice -- keep well in cold storage and are available over a long period, from November until May.

**Look for:** Firm pears of all varieties. The color depends on variety. For Bartletts, look for a pale yellow to rich yellow color; Anjou or Comice -- light green to yellowish-green; Bosc -- greenish-yellow to brownish-yellow (the brown cast is caused by skin russeting, a characteristic of the Bosc pear); Winter Nellis -- medium to light green.

Pears which are hard when you find them in the food store will probably ripen if kept at room temperature, but it is wise to select pears that have already begun to soften -- to be reasonably sure that they will ripen satisfactorily.

**Avoid:** Wilted or shriveled pears with dull-appearing skin and slight weakening of the flesh near the stem, which indicates immaturity. These pears will not ripen. Also avoid spots on the sides or blossom ends of the pear, which means that corky tissue may be underneath.

## **Pineapples**

Pineapples are available all year, but are most abundant from March through June. Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Mexico are principal suppliers. Present marketing practices, including air shipments, allow pineapples to be harvested as nearly ripe as possible. They are delivered to market near the peak of sweetness, with color ranging from green to orange and yellow. A mature green pineapple will normally turn yellow to orange within a few days at room temperature, but many are already fully colored when you find them in the food store.

**Look for:** Bright color, fragrant pineapple aroma, and a very slight separation of the eyes or pips -- the berry-like fruitlets patterned in a spiral on the fruit core. At their mature stage, pineapples are usually dark green, firm, plump, and heavy for their size. The larger the fruit, the greater the proportion of edible flesh.

As the popular varieties ripen, the green color turns to orange and yellow. When fully colored, pineapples are golden yellow, orange-yellow, or reddish brown, depending on the variety.

**Avoid:** Pineapples with sunken or slightly pointed pips, dull yellowish-green color, and dried appearance -- all signs of immaturity. Also avoid bruised fruit, shown by discolored or soft spots, which are susceptible to decay. Other signs of decay are traces of mold, unpleasant odor, and eyes which are dark and watery.

## **Plums and Prunes**

Quality characteristics for both are very similar, and the same buying tips apply to both.

Plums -- A number of varieties of plums are produced in California and are available from June to September. Varieties differ slightly in appearance and flavor, so you should buy and taste one to see if that variety appeals to you.

Prunes -- Only a few varieties of prunes are commonly marketed, and they are all very similar. Prunes are purplish-black or bluish-black, with a moderately firm flesh which separates freely from the pit. Most commercial production is in the Northwestern States. Fresh prunes are available in food stores from August through October.

**Look for:** Plums and prunes with a good color for the variety, in a fairly firm to slightly soft stage of ripeness.

**Avoid:** Fruits with skin breaks, punctures, or brownish discoloration. Also avoid immature fruits (relatively hard, poorly colored, very tart, sometimes shriveled) and overmature fruits (excessively soft, possibly leaking or decaying).

## **Raspberries, Boysenberries, etc.**

Blackberries, raspberries, dewberries, loganberries, and youngberries are similar in general structure. They differ from one another in shape or color, but quality factors are about the same for all.

**Look for:** A bright, clean appearance and a uniform good color for the species. The individual small cells making up the berry should be plump and tender but not mushy. Look for berries that are fully ripened, with no attached stem caps.

**Avoid:** Leaky and moldy berries. You can usually spot them through the openings in the ventilated plastic containers. Also look for wet or stained spots on wood or fiber containers, as possible signs of poor quality or spoiled berries.

## **Strawberries**

First shipments of strawberries come from southern Florida in January, and then production increases, gradually spreading north and west into many parts of the country before tapering off in the fall. Strawberries are in best supply in May and June.

**Look for:** Berries with a full red color and a bright luster, firm flesh, and the cap stem still attached. The berries should be dry and clean, and usually medium to small strawberries have better eating quality than large ones.

**Avoid:** Berries with large uncolored areas or with large seedy areas (poor in flavor and texture), a full shrunken appearance or softness (signs of overripeness or decay), or those with mold, which can spread rapidly from one berry to another.

**Note:** In most containers of strawberries you will likely find a few that are less desirable than others. Try to look at some of berries lower in the container to be sure that they are reasonably free from defects or decay.

## Tangerines

Florida is the chief source of tangerines. Considerable quantities of tangerines and similar types of oranges are produced in California and Arizona, some in Texas, and few are imported. Tangerines are available from late November until early March, with peak supplies in December and January. The Murcott, a large, excellent variety of orange resembling the tangerine, is available from late February through April.

**Look for:** Deep yellow or orange color and a bright luster is your best sign of fresh, mature, good-flavored tangerines. Because of the typically loose nature of tangerine skins, they will frequently not feel firm to the touch.

**Avoid:** Very pale yellow or greenish fruits, which are likely to be lacking in flavor (although small green areas on otherwise high-colored fruit are not bad), and tangerines with cut or punctured skins or very soft spots (all signs of decay, which spreads rapidly).

*Source: USDA Agricultural Marketing Service*