



A Consumer's Guide to Fresh Vegetables

There are no set rules for buying vegetables because they all have individual characteristics and values. Experience in personal selection is the best teacher. The following alphabetical list is designed as a handy reference to help you make your selections.

Artichokes

The globe artichoke is the large, unopened flower bud of a plant belonging to the thistle family. The many leaf-like parts making up the bud are called "scales." Produced domestically only in California, the peak of the crop comes in April and May.

Look for: Plump, globular artichokes that are heavy in relation to size, and compact with thick, green, fresh-looking scales. Size is not important with respect to quality.

Avoid: Artichokes with large areas of brown on the scales and with spreading scales (a sign of age, indicating drying and toughening of the edible portions), grayish-black discoloration (caused by bruises), mold growth on the scales, and worm injury.

Asparagus

California, New Jersey, Washington, and Michigan are the chief sources of domestically grown asparagus.

Look for: Closed, compact tips; smooth, round spears; and a fresh appearance. A rich green color should cover most of the spear. Stalks should be almost as far down as the green extends.

Avoid: Tips that are open and spread out, moldy or decayed tips, or ribbed spears (spears with up-and-down ridges or that are not approximately round). Those are all signs of aging, and indicate tough asparagus and poor flavor. Also

avoid excessively sandy asparagus, because sand grains can lodge beneath the scales or in the tips of the spears and are difficult to remove in washing.

Beans (Snap)

Snap beans, produced commercially in many States, are available throughout the year. Most beans found in the food store will be the common green podded varieties, but large green pole beans and yellow wax beans are occasionally available.

Look for: A fresh, bright appearance with good color for the variety. Get young, tender beans with pods in a firm, crisp condition.

Avoid: Wilted or flabby bean pods, serious blemishes, and decay. Thick, tough, fibrous pods indicate overmaturity.

Beets

Beets, available year-round, are grown in most parts of the Nation. Many beets are sold in bunches with the tops still attached, while others are sold with the tops removed.

Look for: Beets that are firm, round, with a slender tap root (the large main root), a rich, deep red color, and smooth over most of the surface. If beets are bunched, you can judge their freshness fairly accurately by the condition of the tops. Badly wilted or decayed tops indicate a lack of freshness, but the roots may be satisfactory if they are firm.

Avoid: Elongated beets with round, scaly areas around the top surface -- these will be tough, fibrous, and strong-flavored. Also avoid wilted, flabby beets -- they have been exposed to the air too long.

Broccoli

A member of the cabbage family, and a close relative of cauliflower, broccoli is available throughout the year.

California is the heaviest producer, although other States also produce large amounts of broccoli.

Look for: A firm, compact cluster of small flower buds, with none opened enough to show the bright-yellow flower. Bud clusters should be dark green or sage green -- or even green with a decidedly purplish cast. Stems should not be too thick or too tough.

Avoid: Broccoli with spread bud clusters, enlarged or open buds, yellowish-green color, or wilted condition, which are all signs of overmaturity. Also avoid broccoli with soft, slippery, water-soaked spots on the bud cluster. These are signs of decay.

Brussels Sprouts

Another close relative of the cabbage, Brussels sprouts develop as enlarged buds on a tall stem, one sprout appearing where each main leaf is attached. The "sprouts" are cut off and, in most cases, are packed in small consumer containers, although some are packed loose, in bulk. Although they are often available about 10 months of the year, peak supplies appear from October through December.

Look for: A fresh, bright-green color, tight fitting outer leaves, firm body, and freedom from blemishes.

Avoid: Elongated beets with round, scaly areas around the top surface -- these will be tough, fibrous, and strong-flavored. Also avoid wilted, flabby beets -- they have been exposed to the air too long.

Cabbage

Three major groups of cabbage varieties are available: smooth-leaved green cabbage; crinkly-leaved green Savoy cabbage; and red cabbage. All types are suitable for any use, although the Savoy and red varieties are more in demand for use in slaw and salads.

Cabbage may be sold fresh (called "new" cabbage) or from storage. Cabbage is available throughout the year, since it is grown in many States. California, Florida, and Texas market most new cabbage. Many Northern States grow cabbage for late summer and fall shipment or to be held in storage for winter sale.

Look for: Firm or hard heads of cabbage that are heavy for their size. Outer leaves should be a good green or red color (depending on type), reasonably fresh, and free from serious blemishes. The outer leaves (called "wrapper" leaves) fit loosely on the head and are usually discarded, but too many loose wrapper leaves on a head cause extra waste.

Some early-crop cabbage may be soft or only fairly firm, but is suitable for immediate use if the leaves are fresh and crisp. Cabbage out of storage is usually trimmed of all outer leaves and lacks green color, but is satisfactory if not wilted or discolored.

Avoid: New cabbage with wilted or decayed outer leaves or with leaves turned decidedly yellow. Worm-eaten outer leaves often indicate that the worm injury penetrates into the head.

Storage cabbage with badly discolored, dried, or decayed outer leaves probably is over-aged. Separation of the stems of leaves from the central stem at the base of the head also indicates over-age.

Carrots

Freshly harvested carrots are available year round. Most are marketed when relatively young, tender, well-colored, and mild-flavored -- an ideal stage for use as raw carrot sticks. Larger carrots are packed separately and used primarily for cooking or shredding. California and Texas market most domestic carrots, but many other States produce large quantities.

Look for: Carrots which are well formed, smooth, well colored, and firm. If tops are attached, they should be fresh and of a good green color.

Avoid: Roots with large green "sunburned" areas at the top (which must be trimmed) and roots which are flabby from wilting or show spots of soft rot.

Cauliflower

Although most abundant from September through January, cauliflower is available during every month of the year. California, New York, and Florida are major sources. The white edible portion is called "the curd" and the heavy outer leaf covering is called "the jacket leaves." Cauliflower is generally sold with most of the jacket leaves removed, and is wrapped in plastic film.

Look for: White to creamy-white, compact, solid, and clean curds. A slightly granular or "ricey" texture of the curd will not hurt the eating quality if the surface is compact. Ignore small green leaflets extending through the curd. If jacket leaves are attached, a good green color is a sign of freshness.

Avoid: A spreading of the curd -- a sign of aging or overmaturity. Also avoid severe wilting or discolored spots on the curd. A smudgy or speckled appearance of the curd is a sign of insect injury, mold growth, or decay, and should be avoided.

Celery

Celery, a popular vegetable for a variety of uses, is available throughout the year. Production is concentrated in California, Florida, Michigan, and New York. Most celery is of the so-called "Pascal" type, which includes thick-branched, green varieties.

Look for: Freshness and crispness in celery.

The stalk should have a solid, rigid feel and leaflets should be fresh or only slightly wilted. Also look for a glossy surface, stalks of light green or medium green, and mostly green leaflets.

Avoid: Wilted celery and celery with flabby upper branches or leaf stems. You can freshen celery somewhat by placing the butt end in water, but badly wilted celery will never become really fresh again.

Celery with pithy, hollow, or discolored centers in the branches also should be avoided. Celery with internal discoloration will show some gray or brown on the inside surface of the larger branches near where they are attached to the base of the stalk.

Also avoid celery with blackheart, a brown or black discoloration of the small center branches; insect injury in the center branches or the insides of outer branches; and long, thick seed stems in place of the usually small, tender heart branches.

Chard (See Greens)

Chinese Cabbage

Primarily a salad vegetable, Chinese cabbage plants are elongated, with some varieties developing a firm head and others an open, leafy form.

Look for: Fresh, crisp, green plants that are free from blemishes or decay.

Avoid: Wilted or yellowed plants.

Chicory, Endives, Escarole

These vegetables, used mainly in salads, are available practically all year round-but primarily in the winter and spring. Chicory or endive has narrow, notched edges, and crinkly leaves resembling the dandelion leaf. Chicory plants often have "blanched" yellowish leaves in the center which are preferred by many people. Escarole leaves are much broader and less crinkly than those of chicory.

Look for: Freshness, crispness, tenderness, and a good green color of the outer leaves.

Avoid: Plants with leaves which have brownish or yellowish discoloration or which have insect injury.

Note: Witloof or Belgian endive is a compact, cigar-shaped plant which is creamy white from blanching. The small shoots are kept from becoming green by being grown in complete darkness.

Collards (See Greens)

Corn

Sweet corn is available practically every month of the year, but is most plentiful from early May until mid-September. Yellow-kernel corn is the most popular, but some white-kernel and mixed-color corn is sold. Sweet corn is produced in a large number of States during the spring and summer, but most mid-winter supplies come from south Florida.

For best quality, corn should be refrigerated immediately after being picked. Corn will retain fairly good quality for a number of days, if it has been kept cold and moist since harvesting. Therefore, it should be refrigerated as soon as possible and kept moist until used.

Look for: Fresh, succulent husks with good green color, silk-ends that are free from decay or worm injury, and stem ends (opposite from the silk) that are not too discolored or dried.

Select ears that are well-covered with plump, not-too-mature kernels. Sweet corn is sometimes sold husked in overwrapped film trays.

Avoid: Ears with under-developed kernels which lack yellow color (in yellow corn), old ears with very large kernels, and ears with dark yellow or dried kernels with depressed areas on the outer surface. Also avoid ears of corn with yellowed, wilted, or dried husks, or discolored and dried-out stem ends.

Cucumbers

Although cucumbers are produced at various times of the year in many States, and imported during the colder months, the supply is most plentiful in the summer months.

Look for: Cucumbers with good green color that are firm over their entire length. They should be well developed, but not too large in diameter.

Avoid: Overgrown cucumbers that are large in diameter and have a dull color, turning yellowish. Also avoid cucumbers with withered or shriveled ends -- signs of toughness and bitter flavor.

Eggplants

Eggplant is most plentiful during late summer, but is available all year. Although the purple eggplant is more common, white eggplant is occasionally seen in the marketplace.

Look for: Firm, heavy, smooth, and uniformly dark purple eggplants.

Avoid: Those which are poorly colored, soft, shriveled, cut, or which show decay in the form of irregular dark-brown spots.

Endive, Escarole (See Chicory)

Greens

A large number of widely differing species of plants are grown for use as "greens." The better known kinds are spinach, kale, collard, turnip, beet, chard, mustard, broccoli leaves, chicory, endive, escarole, dandelion, cress, and sorrel. Many others, some of them wild, are also used to a limited extent as greens.

Look for: Leaves that are fresh, young, tender, free from defects, and that have a good, healthy, green color. Beet tops and red chard show reddish color.

Avoid: Leaves with coarse, fibrous stems, yellowish-green color, softness (a sign of decay), or a wilted condition. Also avoid greens with evidence of insects -- especially aphids -- which are sometimes hard to see and equally hard to wash away.

Kale (See Greens)

Lettuce

Among the leading U.S. vegetables, lettuce owes its prominence to the growing popularity of salads in our diets. It's available throughout the year in various seasons from California, Arizona, Florida, New York, New Jersey, and other States. Four types of lettuce are generally sold: iceberg, butter-head, Romaine, and leaf.

Iceberg lettuce is the major type. Heads are large, round, and solid, with medium-green outer leaves and lighter green or pale-green inner leaves.

Butter-head lettuce, including the Big Boston and Bibb varieties, has a smaller head than iceberg. This type will have soft, succulent light-green leaves in a rosette pattern in the center.

Romaine lettuce plants are tall and cylindrical with crisp, dark-green leaves in a loosely folded head.

Leaf lettuce includes many varieties -- none with a compact head. Leaves are broad, tender, succulent, and fairly smooth, and they vary in color according to variety.

Look for: Signs of freshness in lettuce. For iceberg lettuce and Romaine, the leaves should be crisp. Other lettuce types will have a softer texture, but leaves should not be wilted. Look for a good, bright color -- in most varieties, medium to light green. Some varieties have red leaves.

Avoid: Heads of iceberg type which are very hard and which lack green color (signs of overmaturity). Such heads sometimes develop discoloration of the inner leaves and midribs, and may have a less desirable flavor. Also avoid heads with irregular shapes and hard bumps on top, which indicate the presence of overgrown central stems.

Check the lettuce for tip burn, a tan or brown area around the margins of the leaves. Look for tip burn of the edges of the head leaves. Slight discoloration of the outer or wrapper leaves will usually not hurt the quality of the lettuce, but serious discoloration or decay definitely should be avoided.

Mushrooms

Grown in houses, cellars, or caves, mushrooms are available year-round in varying amounts. Most come from Pennsylvania, but many are produced in California, New York, Ohio, and other States.

We usually describe mushrooms as having a cap (the wide portion on top), gills (the numerous rows of paper-thin tissue seen underneath the cap when it opens), and a stem.

Look for: Young mushrooms that are small to medium in size. Caps should be either closed around the stem or moderately open with pink or light-tan gills. The surface of the cap should be white or creamy, or uniform light brown if of a brown type.

Avoid: Overripe mushrooms (shown by wide-open caps and dark, discolored gills underneath) and those with pitted or seriously discolored caps.

Okra

Okra is the immature seed pod of the okra plant, generally grown in Southern States.

Look for: Tender pods (the tips will bend with very slight pressure) under 4-1/2 inches long. They should be bright green color and free from blemishes.

Avoid: Tough, fibrous pods, indicated by tips which are stiff and resist bending, or by a very hard body of the pod, or by pale, faded green color.

Onions

The many varieties of onions grown commercially fall into three general classes, distinguished by color: yellow, white, and red.

Onions are available year-round, either fresh or from storage.

Major onion-growing States are California, New York, Texas, Michigan, Colorado, Oregon, and Idaho.

Look for: Hard or firm onions which are dry and have small necks. They should be reasonably free from green sunburn spots or other blemishes.

Avoid: Onions with wet or very soft necks, which usually are immature or affected by decay. Also avoid onions with thick, hollow, woody centers in the neck or with fresh sprouts.

Onions (Green), Leeks

Onions and leeks (sometimes called scallions) are similar in appearance, but are somewhat different in nature. Green onions are ordinary onions harvested very young. They have very little or no bulb formation, and their tops are tubular.

Leeks have slight bulb formation and broad, flat, dark-green tops.

Sold in small, tied bunches, they are all available to some extent throughout the entire year, but are most plentiful in spring and summer.

Look for: Bunches with fresh, crisp, green tops. They should have portions extending two or three inches up from the root end.

Avoid: Yellowing, wilted, discolored, or decayed tops (indicating flabby, tough, or fibrous condition of the edible portions). Bruised tops will not affect the eating quality of the bulbs, if the tops are removed.

Parsley

Parsley is generally available the year-round. It is used both as a decorative garnish and to add its own unique flavor.

Look for: Fresh, crisp, bright-green leaves, for both the curled-leaf and the flat-leaf types of parsley. Slightly wilted leaves can be freshened by trimming off the ends of the stems and placing them in cold water.

Avoid: Yellowing, discolored, or decayed leaves.

Parsnips

Although available to some extent throughout the year, parsnips are primarily late-winter vegetables because the flavor becomes sweeter and more desirable after long exposure to cold temperatures, below 40 °F .

Look for: Parsnips of small or medium width that are well formed, smooth, firm, and free from serious blemishes or decay.

Avoid: Large, coarse roots (which probably have woody, fibrous, or pithy centers) and badly wilted and flabby roots (which will be tough when cooked).

Peppers

Most of the peppers that you'll find are the sweet green peppers, available in varying amounts throughout the year, but most plentiful during late summer. (Fully matured peppers of the same type have a bright red color.) A variety of colored peppers are also available, including white, yellow, orange, red, and purple.

Look for: Peppers with deep, characteristic color, glossy sheen, relatively heavy weight, and firm walls or sides.

Avoid: Peppers with very thin walls (indicated by lightweight and flimsy sides), peppers that are wilted or flabby with cuts or punctures through the walls, and pepper with soft watery spots on the sides (evidence of decay).

Potatoes

For practical purposes, potatoes can be put into three groups, although the distinctions between them are not clear-cut, and there is much overlapping.

"New potatoes" is a term most frequently used to describe those potatoes freshly harvested and marketed during the late winter or early spring. The name is also widely used in later crop producing areas to designate freshly dug potatoes which are not fully matured. The best uses for new potatoes are boiling or creaming. They vary widely in size and shape, depending upon variety, but are likely to be affected by "skinning" or "feathering" of the outer layer of skin. Skinning usually affects only their appearance.

"General purpose potatoes" include the great majority of supplies, both round and long types, offered for sale in markets. With the aid of air-cooled storage, they are amply available throughout the year. As the term implies, they are used

for boiling, frying, and baking, although many of the common varieties are not considered to be best for baking.

Potatoes grown specifically for their baking quality also are available. Both variety and area where grown are important factors affecting baking quality. A long variety with fine, scaly netting on the skin, such as the Russet Burbank, is commonly used for baking.

Look for: With new potatoes, look for firm potatoes that are free from blemishes and sunburn (a green discoloration under the skin). Some amount of skinned surface is normal, but potatoes with large skinned and discolored areas are undesirable. For general-purpose and baking potatoes, look for reasonably smooth, firm potatoes free from blemishes, sunburn, and decay.

Avoid: Potatoes with large cuts, bruises, or decay (they'll cause waste in peeling) and sprouted or shriveled potatoes.

Also avoid green potatoes. The green portions, which contain the alkaloid solanin, may penetrate the flesh and cause bitter flavor.

Radishes

Radishes, available the year-round, are most plentiful from May through July. California and Florida produce most of our winter and spring supplies, while several Northern States provide radishes the rest of the year.

Look for: Medium-size radishes -- 3/4 to 1 inch in diameter -- that are plump, round, firm, and of a good, red color.

Avoid: Very large or flabby radishes (likely to have pithy centers). Also avoid radishes with yellow or decayed tops (sign of over-age).

Rhubarb

This highly specialized vegetable is used like a fruit in sweetened sauces and pies. Very limited supplies are available during most of the year, with best supplies available from January to June.

Look for: Fresh, firm rhubarb stems with a bright, glossy appearance. Stems should have a large amount of pink or red color, although many good-quality stems will be predominantly light green. Be sure that the stem is tender and not fibrous.

Avoid: Either very slender or extremely thick stems, which are likely to be tough and stringy. Also avoid rhubarb that is wilted and flabby.

Rutabagas (See Turnips)

Spinach (See Greens)

Squash (Summer)

Summer squash includes those varieties which are harvested while still immature and when the entire squash is tender and edible. They include the yellow Crookneck, the large Straightneck, the greenish-white Patty Pan, and the slender green Zucchini. Some of these squash are available at all times of the year.

Look for: Squash that are tender and well developed, firm, and fresh-appearing. You can identify a tender squash, because the skin is glossy instead of dull, and it is neither hard nor tough.

Avoid: Stale or overmature squash, which will have a dull appearance and a hard, tough surface. Such squash usually have enlarged seeds and dry, stringy flesh. Also avoid squash with discolored or pitted areas.

Squash (Fall and Winter)

Winter squash are those varieties which are marketed only when fully mature. Some of the most important varieties are the small corrugated Acorn (available all year-round), Butternut, Buttercup, green and blue Hubbard, green and gold Delicious, and Banana. Winter squash is most plentiful from early fall until late winter.

Look for: Full maturity, indicated by a hard, tough rind. Also look for squash that is heavy for its size (meaning a thick wall and more edible flesh). Slight variations in skin color do not affect flavor.

Avoid: Squash with cuts, punctures, sunken spots, or moldy spots on the rind. These are indications of decay. A tender rind indicates immaturity, which is a sign of poor eating quality in winter squash varieties.

Sweet Potatoes

Two types of sweet potatoes are available in varying amounts the year-round. Moist sweet potatoes, sometimes called yams, are the most common type. They have orange-colored flesh and are very sweet. (The true yam is the root of a tropical vine which is not grown commercially in the United States.)

Dry sweet potatoes have pale-colored flesh and are low in moisture.

Most sweet potatoes are grown in the Southern tier and some Eastern States, in an area from Texas to New Jersey. California also is a major producer.

Look for: Firm sweet potatoes with smooth, bright, uniformly colored skins, free from signs of decay. Because they are more perishable than white potatoes, extra care should be used in selecting sweet potatoes.

Avoid: Sweet potatoes with worm holes, cuts, grub injury, or any other defects which penetrate the skin; this causes waste and can readily lead to decay. Even if you cut away the decayed portion, the remainder of the potato flesh may have a bad taste.

Decay is the worst problem with sweet potatoes and is of three types: wet, soft decay; dry, firm decay which begins at the end of the potato, making it discolored and shriveled; and dry rot in the form of sunken, discolored areas on the sides of the potato.

Sweet potatoes should not be stored in the refrigerator.

Tomatoes

Extremely popular and nutritious, tomatoes are in moderate to liberal supply throughout the year. Florida, California, and a number of other States are major producers, but imports supplement domestic supplies.

The best flavor usually comes from locally grown tomatoes produced on nearby farms. This type of tomato is allowed to ripen completely before being picked. Many areas, however, now ship tomatoes which are picked right after the color has begun to change from green to pink.

If your tomatoes need further ripening, keep them in a warm place but not in direct sunlight. Unless they are fully ripened, do not store tomatoes in a refrigerator -- the cold temperatures might keep them from ripening later on and ruin the flavor.

Look for: Tomatoes which are smooth, well ripened, and reasonably free from blemishes.

For fully ripe fruit, look for an overall rich, red color and a slight softness. Softness is easily detected by gentle handling.

For tomatoes slightly less than fully ripe, look for firm texture and color ranging from pink to light red.

Avoid: Soft, overripe, or bruised tomatoes, and tomatoes with sunburn (green or yellow areas near the stem scar), and growth cracks (deep brown cracks around the stem scar). Also avoid decayed tomatoes which will have soft, water-soaked spots, depressed areas, or surface mold.

Turnips

The most popular turnip has white flesh and a purple tope (reddish-purple tinting of upper surface). It may be sold "topped" (with leaves removed) or in bunches with tops still on, and is available in some food stores most of the year.

Look for: Small or medium-size, smooth, fairly round, and firm vegetables. If sold in bunches, the tops should be fresh and should have a good green color.

Avoid: Large turnips with too many leaf scars around the top and with obvious fibrous roots.

Rutabagas are distinctly the yellow-fleshed, large-sized relatives of turnips. They are available generally in the fall and winter, but cold-storage rutabagas are often available in the spring. Late winter storage rutabagas are sometimes coated with a thin layer of paraffin to prevent loss of moisture and shriveling. The paraffin is readily removed with the peeling before cooking.

Look for: Heavy weight for their size, generally smooth, round or moderately elongated shape, and firmness.

Avoid: Rutabagas with skin punctures, deep cuts, or decay.

Watercress

Watercress is a small, round-leaved plant that grows naturally (or it may be cultivated) along the banks of freshwater streams and ponds. It is prized as an ingredient of mixed green salads and as a garnish, because of its spicy flavor. Watercress is available in limited supply through most of the year.

Look for: Watercress that is fresh, crisp[, and has a rich green color.

Avoid: Bunches with yellow, wilted, or decayed leaves.