

Keeping Fresh Produce Fresh

You get all this nice fresh produce throughout the month. Have you ever gotten it home, set it on the counter, and wondered where to put it? Does it all have to be in the refrigerator? Which belongs in the crisper drawer, which does not? If you have one of the fancier new refrigerators that has 2 different crisper drawers, what goes in each drawer? Here are some guidelines for fresh produce storage.

First, don't wash fresh produce until you are ready to use it. Any little drop of moisture left on the skin is an open invitation for molds and bacteria to start growing. Some extra humidity down along the stem on a fresh tomato will start the spoilage process. Damp mushrooms soon become black slimy mushrooms. Keep produce dry!

Refrigerators should be set to keep the temperature around 38-39° F. That's safe for meat, milk and other foods. In today's self-defrosting versions there is not much difference in temperature from the top to the bottom. And the whole area is fairly dry. Only in the crisper drawer, protected from defrosting, is the humidity high. Produce that needs very high humidity can be further protected by storing in a loosely closed bag in the drawer. But don't tie a plastic bag shut. That lets gases build up that can make the fruit or vegetables soften too fast.

So, here's what likes the cold and high humidity in the crisper drawer: Most root vegetables - beets, carrots, parsnips, radishes; most cabbage relatives - broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower; leafy greens - Swiss chard, mustard and collard greens, lettuce, parsley; fresh lima beans and peas; melons and summer squash; asparagus, green onions and sweet corn. You can put parsley, cilantro or green onions in a glass

with enough water to cover the ends, set the glass in a plastic bag and set it in the 'fridge. Fold the top over loosely and they will keep for several weeks.

There's another group that likes it about 45-50° F, and not as humid as the first. They won't last as long at safe refrigerator temperatures unless you have a separate one just for them. These include: cucumbers, eggplant, green beans, okra, sweet and hot peppers, tomatoes, onions and watermelon. These can be on a shelf instead of in the crisper drawer. Fully ripe tomatoes should be refrigerated for longest storage.

Pumpkins and other hard-skinned squash like it even warmer, and much drier. Sweet potatoes like the heat but need a little more humidity. These are all happiest at about 55 -60° F.

Potatoes like it humid like the first group. But if they get too cold they'll darken when you fry them. If you will bake or boil potatoes, keep them in the crisper drawer too. If you plan to make french fries or hash browns, keep them in a dark cabinet, not the refrigerator.

Finally, remember that if you don't want the hassle of fresh produce, get canned or frozen. No matter the form, eating fruits and vegetables is good for our health.