

**PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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It's strawberry season! The fruit is coming, the fruit is here, our local growers are picking! Now's the time to enjoy the best, sweetest fresh berries anywhere. Our local berries could be as close as your nearest grocery store. If you're ready for a ride to the countryside, you'll find them at the roadside stands around Plant City. Be prepared if you take the family. The children will probably beg for a strawberry milkshake or shortcake while you're there.

If you want to pick your own, there will be a benefit pick your own event at Fancy Farms, to support the 4-H youth programs in the county. The benefit will be next Saturday March 19<sup>th</sup> from 8:30 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon. That should give you enough time to pick some fruit. Of course, if you're just too, too busy, they'll have some picked in advance for purchase too. The prices will be just 50 cents a quart if you pick your own, or \$1 a quart if you let the youth do the picking. The address is 3838 Fancy Farms Rd. Take 1-4 East to Exit 25. That will be County Line Road. Go South 3 miles. The farm will be on your right at the corner of County Line and Rice Roads. Take the children along and let them pick their own.

Whether you're picking your own or just deciding which box to buy, choose carefully. You want berries that are full, firm and bright red. Green or white berries will not ripen or get any sweeter after they've been picked. Any watery spots, dull grayish spots, mushy berries or leaking berries should not come home with you. The cap, that little circle of green 'leaves' on the berry, should be bright and fresh. Every berry should

have its cap in place. If there's a leaf or two in the carton they should be bright and fresh too, not limp or brown.

Once you get your fruit home from the grocery, the roadside stand or your fresh picking, be sure to handle them properly. Leave the caps on. Keep them refrigerated. They last longer in the cold. Use them within 5 to 7 days. If they sit in the refrigerator too long they'll start to dry out and shrivel. Soft and chewy is not what strawberries should be. If you bought them in a plastic carton with slits or holes in it, leave them in that. If you picked them or bought them loose put them in a shallow bowl lined with paper towels. Lay a paper towel over them to protect them, but don't seal them under plastic wrap.

Take them out of the refrigerator an hour or two before you want to use them. Letting them warm up will freshen that luscious strawberry flavor and aroma. Cold berries, even the ripest, will taste flat compared to room temperature fruit.

Do not wash them until you are ready to use them! Wet berries will mold and turn to mush. Don't take the green caps off until you have washed them. If you cut or pull the cap off first then water will get down into the center of the fruit. That will break the fruit down from the inside out. Just a good rinse under running tap water is enough washing for strawberries. Handle them gently, in a colander or sieve, when rinsing. They're tender fruit and bruise easily.

So what do you get from all that careful attention? Besides their sweet juiciness, strawberries are great sources for several cancer-fighting compounds, antioxidants, and at least one compound that helps fight macular dystrophy, a type of vision loss. Plus they're a good source of the B vitamin folic acid, necessary for our nervous systems.

Here's a fancy version of spinach salad with strawberries and nuts. If you want even more nutrient power, add another berry for more color. To make this a full dinner salad, slice a small grilled chicken breast over each serving.

#### Florida Berry Spinach Salad

6 cups whole, room temperature strawberries    ¼ cup balsamic vinegar  
1 bag fresh baby spinach, ready to eat            1 cup walnuts or pecans, chopped  
4 oz (1/2 cup) goat or feta cheese, crumbled    8 oz Balsamic vinaigrette dressing

Optional: 1 pint fresh blackberries or blueberries, 4 grilled chicken breasts

Rinse, drain and cap strawberries. Set 8 aside, slice rest of berries. Add vinegar to sliced berries and allow to marinate 5 minutes. Divide spinach into 8 plates for side salads or 4 plates for dinner salads. Drain strawberries and arrange over spinach. Divide cheese and nuts over berries. For dinner salad, sprinkle sliced chicken over each plate. Cut the saved whole berries into slices almost to the tops and squeeze lightly to make them fan out. Lay a berry fan on each plate. Garnish with blackberries or blueberries if using. Pass the vinaigrette dressing to each person. Makes 8 side salads or 4 dinner salads.