PRODUCE -- TO WASH OR NOT TO WASH

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the occurrence of food-borne illness increases during the summer for all foods, including fresh produce. And so, every summer here comes that question – should I wash produce?

For most folks, washing implies the use of soap and water. After all, that's how we clean our dishes, so why not a little soap on your cukes?

While food scientists at Cornell University agree that a detergent solution MAY remove more bacteria and PERHAPS some pesticide residue, they also caution that soap is not intended for washing produce. Once soap gets into some foods, it becomes more difficult to remove than it is from dishes, and it can make people sick. Plus, you know us Americans – if a little of anything is good, a whole lot is better. Sometimes, big thinking can get you into trouble.

The Big 3 of food safety – United States Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency, and United States Food and Drug Administration - all recommend washing fresh fruits and vegetables with just plain running water.

A solution of chlorine bleach and water has also been suggested by some for washing fresh produce. While little research has been done in this area, most of the work that has been done indicates that chlorine solutions are no more effective than plain, potable water.

Sound crazy? Chlorine is supposed to kill germs, right? While chlorine does work well to purify clear water or to sanitize clean kitchen surfaces, it does not seem to work well in combination with the chemicals of fruits and vegetables.

Do scrub the rinds of melons and citrus fruits with a brush under running water to remove soil particles and possible bacteria, viruses, or parasites before cutting into them.

Source: Cornell University.

FRUITY FACTS

NECTARINES – Select nectarines that are aromatic and yield slightly when touched. Refrigerator temperature can kill the taste of nectarines (and other stone fruits), so bring whole nectarines to room temperature before eating.

PEACHES – When selecting peaches, don't rely on that pretty red blush to indicate ripeness. The amount of blush depends on the variety of the peach and is not always a sign of ripeness. Instead, look for peaches with well-defined creases and good fragrance.

Make easy work of peeling peaches by blanching them in boiling water for about 30 seconds; then plunge into ice-cold water for the same amount of time. You should be able
to easily pull off the skins with your fingers or a paring knife.

**CHERRIES** – They are currently appearing in our local grocery stores. If your only experience with cherries is the overly sweet maraschinos in a jar, do give fresh sweet cherries a try. Unfortunately, these are expensive in our area. Maximize your investment by storing fresh cherries in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. Resist the urge to rinse them in advance, so they'll be ready to eat when you are; unwashed cherries will last longer. Stemmed cherries may cost less, but cherries with stems last longer.

**FRUIT VINEGARS** - Fruit-flavored vinegars are currently popular and a great way to add flavor to dishes without adding fat. Store these in the refrigerator. We tend to think of vinegar as a safe food because of its high acid content. However, the addition of other foods, such as fruit, “dilutes” the vinegar's acidity.

**SMART SALAD DRESSING**

Choosing low-fat salad dressing is a smart move. By using these instead of full-fat versions, you can save almost 100 calories and 14 fat grams per serving.

The two top-selling low-fat dressings in America are blue cheese and Ranch. If - like me - you've been passing up blue cheese for Ranch thinking it must have more calories because of that wonderful, luscious, tangy cheese, here's great news. Two tablespoons of low-fat blue contain nearly a third less calories than the same amount of low-fat Ranch and half the fat.

Before you break out the blue cheese dressing to celebrate, don't take this good calorie news as permission to put more croutons or cheese on your salad. And remember to check nutrition labels; your calorie instincts may be wrong.

Source: *Cooking Light* magazine.

**ENTERTAINING TIP**

Chilling enough drinks for a party can be a challenge. Wheelbarrows, children's wagons, and large metal tubs are popular container choices because of their size and good looks. To cool down your drinks more quickly, add a little salt to the ice in your container - whatever it may be. It's that old “solutes in a solvent depress freezing” business. After the party, be careful not to pour out the salty water in your yard as it may damage grass or shrubs.

**COOL TRICKS WITH ICE CUBES**

**POWER MONITOR** - Summer thunderstorms can knock out electrical power causing your refrigerator and freezer to stop. If these appliances are off for long, the food inside will get too warm and need to be discarded.

This situation can be a real problem if you are not at home to realize the power has been off. Looking at the food does not always give you an accurate “read” as thawed food may refreeze back to its original shape. So the next time you're going to be away, place a plastic bag of ice cubes in your freezer. On your return, if the ice is no longer in cubes, start the cleanup.

**DISPOSAL CLEANUP** - Sometimes bits of food cling to the blades of your food disposal and harden. Then an unpleasant odor can develop. Prevent the smellies by feeding ice to your disposal a couple of times a week. The grinding of the ice will break stuck-on food particles from the blades of the disposal.

**COOL YOUR EGGS** - It is important to cool down hard-cooked eggs as soon as they are done to prevent the formation of a gray-green ring around the yolk. A typical cool down technique is to run cold water over the eggs. Instead of standing at the sink doing this – and tiring out your legs – refill the saucepan used to cook the eggs with cold tap water and add several ice cubes.
ANNOUNCEMENTS

Color Me Healthy Training for Child Care Providers: Saturday, September 16, 9 a.m. - 12 noon -- Come learn great ideas for encouraging children to eat healthy and move more. Participants will receive a free teaching kit. Call me at 671-3276 to register. There is a $3 fee payable at the door. Training will be at the Robeson County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service located in the O. P. Owens Agriculture Center, Highway 72 West, Lumberton.

Individuals with disabilities and/or special needs interested in this meeting should call so proper arrangements can be made.

The Robeson Regional Agricultural Fair will be September 28 – October 7. Be getting your handmade crafts, clothing, canned products, and baked goods ready to enter. To receive a fair book listing categories and details on entering, call me at 671-3276.

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