



Vermont Foodbank
www.vtfoodbank.org

Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Handling Guidelines for Food Shelves

Food Quality and Safety

Food distributed to food shelf visitors must be safe and of good quality. Good quality food tastes, smells, and looks good, and is often more nutritious. Safety means the food will not make anyone sick. The goal of proper food handling is to provide both safe and good quality foods.

Keep It Clean

Germ or bacteria can get into food during handling.

- Keep hands, work surfaces, utensils and the refrigerator clean.
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds to remove germs or bacteria before handling fresh produce. This can greatly reduce the risk of food poisoning.
- Watch out for cross contamination. Never handle raw meat before fresh produce without washing hands and disinfecting work surfaces first.

Storage/Refrigeration Tips

- Keep the temperature between 34°F and 40°F. Keep a thermometer in the refrigerator and check it daily.
- Keep any raw meat, poultry, or fish on the lowest shelf in the refrigerator and away from fresh produce. This will prevent meats from potentially dripping and contaminating the produce.

Handling Fresh Produce Deliveries

1. After receiving, sort fresh fruit and vegetables by quality and level of ripeness.
 - Fully ripe and over-ripe produce should be used first.
 - Discard moldy produce and anything badly bruised or with large soft spots.
 - Produce with some spots, soft areas or bruises is generally safe to use, but should be distributed immediately and held under refrigeration if possible. Consider cutting the spots out if it won't compromise the quality of the produce.
 - Remove produce from cardboard boxes, bulk cases and bags. Divide it up into family size portions or have bags available for visitors to choose their own. Very perishable items like greens should be prepackaged to preserve shelf life.
2. Do not wash produce before distributing. Washing introduces extra moisture that can cause spoilage.
3. Follow the "First In, First Out" (FIFO) rule. This means you use the oldest produce first. Labeling produce with delivery dates will help with FIFO.

Holding Produce at Room Temperature

Some fruits and vegetables can be stored at room temperature. Produce that can be stored at 55-65°F until ripe include:

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|-------------------|--------------------|
| o Apple | o Pear |
| o Avocado | o Plum |
| o Banana | o Tomato |
| o Cantaloupe | o Watermelon |
| o Honeydew melons | o Winter squash |
| o Kiwifruit | o Pumpkin |
| o Mango | o White potato |
| o Nectarine | o Sweet potato |
| o Peach | o Garlic and onion |

Produce that can be stored at 45-50°F include:

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|--------------|-----------------|
| o Snap beans | o Summer squash |
| o Cucumber | o Citrus fruits |
| o Eggplant | o Pineapple |
| o Okra | o Tomatillo |
| o Pepper | |

Distribution

- If repackaging produce, use clean food grade boxes, storage bags or plastic wrap. Leave the opening loose so as not to trap extra moisture.
- Remind visitors to wash produce prior to use under running water and scrub with clean hands or a clean brush. Do not soak produce in water since this increases the chance of cross-contamination.

Display

- Create prominent, centrally located, and well organized fruit and vegetable displays. The more visible and appealing, the more likely it is to be taken by food shelf visitors. Consider setting up a Farmers' Market type display with produce in baskets at eye level.
- Create visually appealing signage including photos, labels and posters to draw attention to the fruits and vegetables and their nutritional benefits, etc.
- Remove produce from boxes so that visitors can clearly see what is being offered.
- Continue to sort through and discard any produce that is spoiled.
- Obtain a glass front cooler to display highly perishable produce like tender greens while still keeping it as fresh as possible.

Prepack Produce

- Providing visitors with convenient prepackaged fruits and vegetables greatly increases distribution. Consider prepackaging produce in familiar and convenient bags and trays you would find in grocery stores such as lettuce bags, paper plates/trays with plastic wrap or clear plastic/zip lock bags.
- If fruits and vegetables are cut or sliced, remember they must always be refrigerated for food safety.

Other Suggestions

- Offer simple suggestions to encourage food shelf visitors to try something new. Share ideas and quick tips.
- Display recipe cards next to the items being distributed.
- Consider offering taste tests or cooking demos.
- Solicit feedback from visitors about their favorite ways to prepare different produce.

Summary

- Keep everything clean: hands, work surfaces, packaging and produce.
- Sort produce by ripeness and quality. Discard when necessary.
- Distribute produce using FIFO: first in, first out.
- Store at room temperature or in a refrigerator, as appropriate.

Resources

Vermont Fresh: A Fruit and Vegetable Handbook, contains information on over 40 fruits and vegetables, their nutritional value, storage advice, preparation tips and many recipes. Available at www.vtfoodbank.org.