

Put a little spring in your diet

by Christina Choi March 13, 2012

With the warming temperature as we head into spring, tender vegetables and juicy fruits will be widely available in the coming weeks.

This will be the perfect time to appreciate the widening array of fresh ingredients available at your grocery stores and local farmers market.



“If you’re not a big fan of fruits and vegetables, you should try them in the spring because this is when they taste the best,” says Brigitte Caille, a Los Angeles and Ventura County registered dietitian. “If you’re going to introduce something new, this is a good time to do it because you’ll be getting good quality products.”

Buying seasonal produce at their peak for flavor and nutrition not only tastes great. It also provides an opportunity for you to incorporate new foods into your diet and to experiment with recipes.

Eating seasonally is also encouraged because it’s inexpensive and it’s environmentally friendly, especially when garden-fresh produce will be available at the grocery store and local farmers market.

Another reason to embrace seasonal ingredients is “spring cleaning” your diet. Leave hibernation mode and get rid of the heavy rich foods that are not quite as healthy and start bringing in some new vegetables, recommends Naperville registered dietitian [Christine Palumbo](#).

“Use them up and don’t replace them and have a lighter approach to what you have in your pantry and your refrigerator,” she adds.

So take advantage of spring’s freshest ingredients and keep your eyes peeled for these following foods the next time you’re out shopping.

The two A’s: asparagus and artichokes

Asparagus and artichokes are harbingers of spring, says [Palumbo](#). “They truly are springtime vegetables that are truly hard to get at other times of the year that are as fresh and grown relatively locally,” she adds. These green vegetables are rich in flavor, perfect for grilling and roasting. For those who get intimidated by artichokes and their tough and prickly exterior, Palumbo recommends baby artichokes for their small, tender flesh. She prepares them on the grill, cut in half with a drizzle of olive oil, salt and freshly ground pepper.

Another benefit to eating seasonally, asparagus prices will drop because they will be offered as a “loss leader” in the stores, placed on sale in order to bring in foot traffic. These green stalks will become easier to find in the next few weeks leading up to Easter.

The perfect pairing: peas and radishes

Peas and radishes are wonderful springtime vegetables that taste delicious together. Fresh peas are offered in a widening array such as English, sugar snap and snow that packed full of nutrients such as iron and vitamin B. **Palumbo** recommends trading in your readily available frozen peas for fresh ones to provide a wonderful crunch to any meal. Another crunchy vegetable, radishes are really easy and take a short amount of time to grow. These little roots provide sources of fiber, potassium and vitamin C. Plus, they're low in calories and have a mild flavor.

A garden on your plate: salad greens

Many springtime dishes can be prepared without a lot of preparation, which dietitian Caille recommends eating greens raw. "If you're thinking about big salads with lots of flavor, there's tons of different lettuce greens in them – baby lettuce, spinach arugula," she says.

Barbara Fine, an Evanston-based dietician and spokeswoman for the Illinois Dietetic Association, appreciates watercress around this time, a delicate leafy vegetable. Combine different types of lettuces for an eye-pleasing salad and top with some raw colorful vegetables and a splash of homemade vinaigrette.

Flavor with herbs

An easy and healthy way to flavor foods is by adding fresh herbs that grow plentifully in the spring. Make your own dressing with fresh herbs, olive oil and lemon or sprinkle them on top of steamed vegetables as a garnish. Caille says the green leafy variety such as basil, mint and parsley are in abundance at this time. Herbs also keep well as potted plants in the kitchen near sunlight to perk up any dish.

Enjoy berries

As the weather warms from spring into summer, the sweetest additions include juicy fruits, especially strawberries, raspberries and cherries. Not only do these have sumptuous tart flavors, they are great sources of antioxidants, potassium and fiber. Dietitian Fine points out an important note: many berries are often grown with strong pesticides so it's best to buy the organic variety or from local farmers who are likely to use safer farming techniques. For a list of the top 12 fruits and vegetables that have the most pesticide residues, see the sidebar.

Spring is truly a season of abundance. "Eat a variety so you get an array of nutrients in your diet so you become healthier and eat them in natural form as possible," she says, encouraging eaters to not limit themselves in food, but to enjoy a variety of all colors of the rainbow.