Summertime means Fresh Fruits and Vegetables!

Throughout the year GECAC students have had many opportunities to taste and even grow new fruits and vegetables. Now that summer is here, the possibilities of trying a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables are limitless. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables each day is recommended by the 2005 USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans for health and wellness. With the abundance of produce during the summer, it can often be tricky to properly choose, handle and store these fresh foods. Here is a collection of tips that will help you and your family pick, handle and store fresh produce and prevent foodborne illness!

At the Store:

It is important to choose only high-quality fruits and vegetables. Bruised, shriveled or slimy produce may harbor bacteria. When choosing produce, make sure the produce has been refrigerated or put on ice. Shop for perishable fruits and vegetables at the end of your shopping trip, not the beginning, so these items stay cool.

On the Way Home

It’s best to minimize the time that food sits in your car, especially during the summer. Plan your shopping trip to be your last errand of the day and when temperatures are cooler.

In the Kitchen

Immediately refrigerate all fruits and vegetables when you get home. Don’t forget this simple trick to prevent contamination: store meats in containers below fruits and vegetables to prevent meat juices from dripping on produce. Potatoes, tomatoes, pears and whole melons are sometimes stored at room temperature to maintain quality or speed ripening. Keep these items in a clean dry place away from where you prepare meats. Remember to discard fruits and vegetables that have been stored beyond their shelf life or are shriveled or slimy.

When you are ready to handle your produce, wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with hot, soapy water. Be sure to remove the outer leaves or peel produce to reduce the amount of bacteria already on the produce. Wash all fruits and vegetables with cool running tap water. Scrub firm produce with clean and stiff produce brush, especially melons with hard skins. Melon skins can have lots of bacteria, do not let skins touch other produce. Most importantly, don’t wash fruits in household soap or detergent. There are a number of cleansers on the market that are formulated for washing produce only. Try one of those if you wish. When cooking, don’t use the same boards for meat as you do for produce, wash all surfaces and utensils you use often during the cooking process, and refrigerate fresh produce within two hours of peeling or cutting. After serving, don’t leave fresh cut produce out for longer than two hours. Use a cooler with ice to transport and store fresh fruits and vegetables during summer picnics or events.

Lastly, enjoy the fruits and vegetables of the season! Try a new recipe or invent one. No-cook summer salads are a great option for dinner when it is too hot to cook inside. For more healthy recipes, visit the Healthy Lifestyles Program page at www.gecac.net.