

When Is Fruit Ready To Eat?

UNIVERSITY PARK, (Centre Co.) — Health-conscious Americans are eating more varieties of fruit than ever before, yet many consumers are at a loss when it comes to determining ripeness.

A typical shopper might buy a bunch of green bananas and store them in a fruit bowl with apples and pears, only to return a few days later to find his bananas softer than a one-minute egg.

"Sometimes, even I can't tell how ripe something is by just looking at it," says Kathleen Evensen, associate professor of postharvest physiology in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. "It's best to find what you like and then look for the characteristics of that fruit."

Evensen says the best way to ensure tasty fruit is to know how it ripens. She explains that horticulturists have divided fruit into two categories: climacteric and non-climacteric.

Climacteric fruit (apples, pears, tomatoes, avocados, bananas, peaches, nectarines and other

tropical fruit) can ripen after being picked. Climacteric fruit also emits a colorless gas called ethylene, which acts as a ripening agent.

"Ripening apples, pears and bananas can give off a lot of ethylene," Evensen says.

"In an enclosed area like a fruit bowl, mixed fruit can ripen very quickly," she adds. "In fact, if you put a ripe banana in a bag with an apple, the banana will ripen the apple—but the apple will smell like a banana"

Non-climacteric fruit (citrus fruits, grapes, strawberries and small berries) is ripe when picked and does not give off ethylene unless the fruit is infected by a fungus. Evensen says these fruits do not improve with age. "You buy them, you refrigerate them and then you eat them," Evensen says. "For instance, strawberries should be refrigerated immediately, even if the berries have some white on top. They are never going to get any riper."

Evensen warns that ripening

varies with each type of fruit and even within the same species. However, you can ripen most fruit by remembering just a few guidelines.

For example, bananas are picked green and shipped to U.S. ports where they are treated with ethylene for about 24 hours. Stored at a warmer temperature than other fruit, the bananas will continue to ripen during shipment, in the store and in your home.

"Refrigeration slows down ripening in bananas, but the cold temperature makes bananas, a tropical fruit, turn black and go soft," Evensen says.

Tomatoes are also picked green and treated with ethylene for 24 hours so they ripen during shipping. Evensen does not recommend refrigerating tomatoes. If tomatoes still show some green, leave them out to ripen.

In many cases, refrigeration will stop the production of ethylene in apples and some pears, giving these fruits a longer shelf life once they're purchased.

Apples are picked at what growers call "optimum maturity," just before they start to ripen. The fruit is then stored at low temperatures and with low levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide (called "controlled atmosphere") to retard ripening. "Apples can be kept by growers for 12 to 14 months in controlled atmosphere storage," Evensen says.

"If you buy something that's not as ripe as you would like, just leave it out for a while and then refrigerate it," Evensen says.

"Growers are producing fruit that is firmer, in order to stand up to shipping, so it's harder for consumers to really tell if it has reached the right ripeness," Evensen says.

Non-climacteric fruit such as oranges, lemons, grapefruit and limes can be treated with ethylene as well, but the gas only makes the fruit's rind turn from green to a color consumers are familiar with. "That's called de-greening, but that doesn't affect the taste of the fruit. It will taste the same the moment you pick it from the tree as it will after you've bought it in a store a week later," Evensen says.

Another indicator of ripeness is what fruit experts call "ground color," Evensen explains. Ground color is the level of green color still in the fruit. Simply put, the less green you see, the riper the

fruit. For example, a Golden Delicious apple can be quite green in a store bin, losing that color over time until it turns yellow. The trick, Evensen says, is to find out what stage of ripeness suits your taste.

The taste of some climacteric fruits, such as melons, do not improve much after harvest, because they get most of their flavor from the plant's vine. For cantaloupes, shoppers can smell the fruit or look at ground color beneath the rough exterior of the melon. "If it doesn't smell like a cantaloupe, it's not ripe," she says.

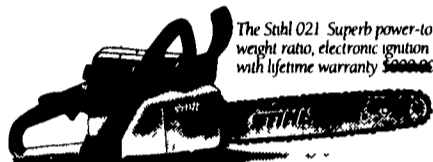
Kiwis also can show ripeness through ground color. "You can see green beneath all that fuzzy stuff," Evensen assures.

Watermelon ripeness is harder to determine, Evensen says. "The best method is to knock on them. They're supposed to sound kind of hollow."

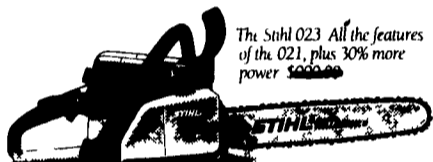
Folk wisdom about ripening fruit, like sticking a nail into the bottom of a pear or apple, is largely baseless. "If you puncture fruit it will produce ethylene, but who would want to eat it after a nail has been in it," she said.

Still, Evensen says that one bad apple really does spoil the whole bunch. "A rotten apple will overripen the fruit near it and pass on any disease to its neighbors," she said.

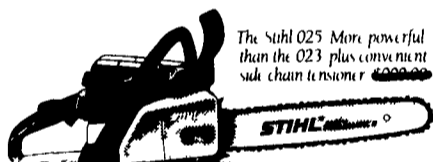
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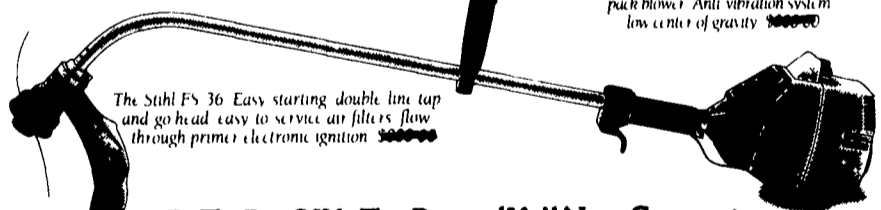
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