

Avoiding Refrigerator Slime

Wendy Warner, MD, ABIHM

Hopefully, you've been busy all summer gathering fresh fruits and vegetables from local growers to improve your diet, make your taste buds happy, and help save a local farm. Unfortunately, if you're like most Americans, you've also been throwing out 14-25% of this food due to spoilage! You get excited about all the wonderful stuff at the market, and before you know it, you have more than a week's worth of things in your fridge. Or, you put it in the crisper drawers and forget about it---out of sight, out of mind. Here are some great ideas on how to save money, vitamins and taste.

First, the basics: How to get things home from the market. Go to the farmers market as early as possible, before things get too hot. Take a cooler in the car and transport your produce home in it, even if you think it's a short trip. Then store the produce appropriately as soon as you get home. Keep things whole---don't even remove stems. This decreases the chance of bacteria getting into the produce from open spots near the stem, etc.

Next, what is best left on the counter, and what isn't: You should never put potatoes, onions, garlic or winter squash in the fridge. Place these in cool, dry places with lots of air circulation; don't leave them in a plastic bag. Tomatoes are best left on the counter; they will continue to ripen and can sit out for nearly a week. Uncut watermelon can be left on a counter for up to 2 weeks and will actually increase it's content of polyphenols while it sits. Parsley, basil and some other herbs do well on the counter stored upright in a small glass of water. (They can also be stored this way in the fridge, covered with a plastic bag). If you've gotten citrus fruit at the store, it can be out of the fridge for up to a week.

When it comes to refrigeration, the most important things to remember are that produce is still breathing, has varying reactions to different temperatures, and differing reactions to ethylene gas. Moisture content is also an issue. Since produce is still interacting with the environment ("breathing"), it's best to NOT put anything in an airtight bag. Keep any containers loosely closed/wrapped. Since some things like cooler temperatures (berries, cherries), place these in the back or along the sides of the fridge. Some produce that has a high water content (mushrooms, cucumbers) do well in brown paper bags in a cold section of the fridge; this helps reduce fungal growth.

Ethylene gas is produced by most fruits and some vegetables and speeds ripening/rotting of produce by varying degrees. High gas producers include apples, apricots, cantalopes, figs and honeydew, as well as bananas, avocado, peaches, pears and plums. These items should not be stored near other produce, as they will increase spoilage. The more ethylene gas-sensitive foods include broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, peas, peppers and others. In an effort to combat the effects of ethylene gas, several companies make items that absorb it. Extra Life discs or EGGs are dropped into crisper drawers, where they absorb the gas and add several days to the life of your food. Better than this, I think, are green bags such as Evert Fresh, which are polyethylene bags coated with a mineral from oya clay, which absorbs the gas. I have found that these bags can extend the life of foods to several weeks if they were purchased right after harvest! The bags

also decrease uv light exposure, so they slow down the loss of certain vitamins. Unfortunately, the bags themselves are plastic and NOT biodegradable. Although they can be used 8-10 times (wash in between and dry thoroughly), they most likely are not recyclable, as the mineral coating would be considered a contaminant.

If you get a bumper crop of food, consider some of the following: make a pot of vegetable soup and freeze it. Make your own marinara sauce and freeze it. Roast garlic and freeze it in small amounts. Chop herbs, put in ice cube trays with water and freeze them, then store the cubes in a bag in the freezer. Chop or slice ginger and store covered with sherry in a small jar (great for marinades and stir fries).

Most important, put the produce in an obvious place in your fridge, so you'll see it and eat it every day. Don't hide the healthy stuff in drawers while leaving left over pizza and soda in plain view!