

As you all probably know by now, I am an active member of the VISTA Organic Garden. October through May is our best growing season. During this time of year root vegetables, lettuce, kale and crucifers (a vegetable of the mustard family, especially mustard greens and various cabbages) are plentiful in the garden. I've been enjoying these fruits – or more accurately, vegetables – of my labor over the last few months and thought I'd share a little primer on their nutritive value so you enjoy their benefits, too.

Radishes contain folate, fiber, riboflavin and potassium, as well as good amounts of copper, vitamin B6, magnesium, manganese, calcium and fiber. They have antioxidants, which help protect against free radical damage and help protect the immune system. Enjoy with hummus or in a salad.

Carrots have four different colors; green, orange/yellow, red/purple and white. The orange and yellow help protect the cardiovascular system. By consuming just a quarter cup daily can significantly lower your risk of heart and other cardiovascular-related disease. Carrots have antioxidant benefits and helps prevent oxidative cell damage. Beta-carotene found in carrots is well known for its impact on eye health, as well as for their carotenoids and antioxidant properties.

When purchasing carrots, check the stem for any dark discoloration, as it is a sign of age. The carrot tops (greens) should have a bright color and not be wilted. Exposure to air, light and heat, along with length of time in storage, will affect nutrient composition. Carrots can be stored for several weeks in the refrigerator by wrapping in a damp paper towel and place in airtight container.

Broccoli contains sulforaphane, anti-inflammatory sulfur compounds touted for their anti-cancer benefits. Broccoli also contains high levels of vitamin K, C, B6, riboflavin, magnesium, copper, chromium, calcium and fiber. Eating raw broccoli provides greater nutrient content than if steamed. If you boil broccoli, dump the vegetable out and drink the water to preserve the nutrients. Broccoli also lowers C- Reactive Protein, which is an indication of cardiac inflammation.

Broccoli is best eaten within a few day of purchasing. Do not wash prior to putting in refrigerator. Wrap in damp paper towels, and do not put in a sealed container or plastic bag.

Kale is one of the world's healthiest foods. It contains vitamin K, A, C, manganese, copper, fiber and many B vitamins. Kale contains 45 different flavonoids that support your body's detoxification system and help lower cholesterol.

Look for firm undamaged leaves when buying kale, and keep it, unwashed, in the refrigerator till ready to use. To preserve the nutrient value of kale, you should blanch it by simply cooking in boiling water for a few seconds and remove.

Tomatoes contain lycopene, antioxidants, vitamin C and B, biotin, molybdenum, potassium, copper, manganese and fiber. They are heart-healthy, lowering total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol and triglycerides. They are also anti-cancer and lower oxidative stress. This versatile fruit (yes, it is a fruit) can be eaten raw or cooked. I grew several varieties of cherry tomatoes this season. They're great consumed raw and, of course, make a great sauce. Store them at room temperature away from sunlight.

Onions are also anti-inflammatory, and contain flavonoids, quercetin, biotin, manganese, copper, vitamin C, B, fiber and allyl sulfides. Quercetin helps lower your risk of some types of cancer, lowers cholesterol and triglycerides, and are beneficial to our connective tissue. Quercetin will not degrade when cooked. Store in a well ventilated space at room temperature away from heat and light in a perforated basket. Except for green onions, do not refrigerate. Keep away from potatoes, as they will absorb their moisture and ethylene gas, which will cause them to spoil more quickly.

Onions are super easy to grow. Just cut about an inch from the stem, stick it in the ground and cover with soil. Keep moist for several weeks so the root takes hold.

Potatoes are part of the nightshade family that includes tomatoes, peppers and eggplant. They contain vitamins B and C, potassium, copper, manganese, phosphorus, niacin, fiber and pantothenic acid. Vitamin B plays an important role in methylation. Methylation is imperative for cancer prevention. Potatoes protect against cardiovascular damage by reducing homocysteine, a marker for cardiovascular inflammation. Homocysteine damages blood vessel walls, which increases the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Buy potatoes with no bruises, discoloration, cuts, or 'eyes' (the little nubs on the skin). The best place to store potatoes is in a root cellar, but we live in Florida so that's not an option. Do not store in the refrigerator, as the potatoes starch will turn to sugar. Instead, store them in a ventilated basket in the pantry.

Members of VISTA also grow some crazy crucifers like cabbage, bok choy, cauliflower, mustard greens and Brussels sprouts. Many of us are there on Saturday morning. Stop by and we'll be happy to give you a free tour.