

Extension Column – April 1, 2021
Buffalo County Extension
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Produce Food Safety at Farmers' Markets

Farmers' markets will be opening soon. Shopping at the farmers' market not only offers some of the freshest fruits and vegetables available, but the opportunity to buy locally.

While exploring the farmers' market it is important to keep food safety in mind. All types of grown produce have some bacteria. They can be contaminated from soil, water or during harvesting. Reduce risks from possible harmful bacteria by following these basic guidelines.

Pay attention to vendors' food safety practices. Check the stand's overall cleanliness including disposable gloves and clean utensils for food handling, covered garbage cans, coolers for perishables and clean bags. Fresh produce should look clean and fresh and be displayed off the ground/floor. Take time to talk to and learn from vendors. Many are eager to talk about their growing methods and how they store and prepare produce.

Go early for the best selections. Avoid produce with mold, large bruises or cuts, and insect holes which are great places for bacteria to hide and spread rapidly to the inside of the fruit or vegetable. If purchasing "damaged" produce, use it in cooked items such as spaghetti sauce or chili.

Always keep raw meat separate from other foods to prevent cross-contamination. Use a cooler/insulated bag, especially on hot days or if more than 1 hour to get home. Store the cooler in the passenger part of the car, rather than the trunk. Do not allow perishable foods to be in the temperature danger zone (40°F to 140°F) for more than 2 hours because pathogens (organisms such as viruses or bacteria that can cause illness) grow rapidly in this zone. If air temperature is above 90°F, refrigerate within 1 hour. Make the market the last stop before going home.

At home store perishable fresh fruits and vegetables (like strawberries, lettuce, herbs, and mushrooms) in a clean refrigerator at a temperature of 40° F or below. Use a refrigerator thermometer to check! If not sure whether an item should be refrigerated to keep its quality, ask the market vendor. Refrigerate all produce that is purchased pre-cut.

Reusable grocery totes are a popular, eco-friendly choice to transport food, but be sure to use separate totes for raw meat and poultry and ready-to-eat foods such as fresh produce and breads. It is important to wash reusable totes often. Reduce or eliminate bacteria by frequently washing grocery totes, either in the washing machine or by hand with hot, soapy water and drying them in a hot dryer. Plastic lined and insulated bags should be scrubbed using hot water and soap and air-dried. Clean all areas where totes are placed, such as the kitchen counter. Store totes in a clean, dry location. Avoid leaving empty totes in the trunk of a vehicle unless wrapped to keep clean. Do not use reusable grocery bags for other purposes, such as carrying gym clothes or children's toys.

For more food safety information, contact Nebraska Extension in Buffalo County, 1400 East 34th Street, Kearney, NE 68847, or call (308) 236-1235.