

# Journey to Health: Meals from the Garden

By Eli Follick

Fruits and vegetables are considered healthful. However, by growing them yourself you can reap even more benefits than when you buy them in a store.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Heart Association (AHA) recommend getting at least 150 minutes of moderate cardiovascular exercise each week, and both organizations consider gardening activities to be moderate cardiovascular exercise. Certain activities such as digging or moving stones and bags of grass seeds or peat moss can also build strength. Raking can improve your range of motion. Being outdoors, surrounded by nature, can reduce stress and enhance your sense of well-being. Further, the American Diabetes Association recommends filling half of your plate with vegetables and fruits, a quarter portion with lean (low-fat) protein, and the remaining quarter with whole grains.

I choose what I grow based upon my personal nutritional requirements, even though, truth

be told, I could buy most of what I need in the supermarket, either fresh or frozen. However, harvesting what I want from my garden ensures that it is fresh, untouched by any chemical sprays, and available in the amounts I will use each day. Nothing you can buy tastes as good, for example, as fresh-picked, steamed stringless green beans. My goal is to have fresh vegetables at least three to four times a week. I check what is ready to be harvested and incorporate it into my evening meal.

Tomatoes are among my favorites as they contain lycopene, a powerful antioxidant that helps neutralize cell-damaging free radicals. They also contain other compounds that add to their healthful impact on various systems in our bodies. Tomatoes are versatile and can be used for everything from sauces to main dishes. Squash, too, has a full assortment of vitamins and minerals along with many other nutrients. I also plant peas and beans. The National Cancer Institute reports that, in addition to protein and fiber, peas contain a compound that can help prevent cells from becoming cancerous. Beans can help lower

cholesterol and help stabilize blood sugar levels in addition to other contributions to nutrition and health, according to the CDC.

Depending upon what is available in seeds, I also plant eggplant, cucumbers, radishes, different lettuces, and, occasionally, pumpkins. Each one of these has components that contribute to health.

Once you have your garden producing, it is important to consume the fresh vegetables as soon as possible. The internet has an unending collection of vegetable dishes. Salads, too, are an easy way to incorporate what your garden grows on a daily basis. In colder months, a ratatouille or vegetable stew is an easy way to use whatever is ready to cook from the garden. Start by sauteing onions, cabbage, celery, and mushrooms. After about 10 minutes, add whatever you have at hand, including diced eggplant, raw spinach, and carrots. Continue cooking and stirring until everything is close to ready. Then add tomatoes, and cook until all is consistently melded.

One of the benefits of gardening is that you may have more produce



than you can use at one time. However, much of it can be saved. I dice squash for example, put it in a canning jar with some water, and freeze it until I need it. Similarly, if you can't finish a dish, you can always freeze what is left in portion-sized plastic sandwich bags.

You might also consider donating to a food bank, which provides the benefit of knowing you have provided some healthy fresh goodness to people in need.

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