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INTRODUCTION

The intent of this guide is to educate shoppers on the storage and handling of Vermont Harvest of the Month (VTHOM) products. VTHOM is a statewide effort to promote local Vermont products that are available throughout the year. Each month, a new crop is featured, highlighting product seasonality in Vermont. This guide helps answer questions about what to look for when purchasing specific items, how to treat products when you get home so they keep, nutritional values, and ideas for flavor pairings. Whether it’s your first time buying winter squash or you buy it all of the time, there’s useful information in this guide for everyone!
SWISS CHARD

Swiss chard is a relative of the beet and is native to the Mediterranean region. Both Ancient Greeks and Romans recognized chard for its medicinal properties; it can detoxify the body and supports the health of liver and lungs. This crop is known as Swiss chard because it was first described by a Swiss botanist in the 16th century. Many varieties exist. The stems of rainbow chard come in a variety of colors including white, yellow, gold, orange, pink, red, or even striped.

HOW TO BUY: Look for deep green leaves and firm stems. Avoid chard that is wilted or has any leaf damage.

STORAGE: Store dry chard leaves in an airtight plastic bag. Squeeze out as much air as possible and place in fridge. Chard will stay crunchy and crisp for around a week.

PREPARATION: Rinse under cool running water. Separate stems from green leaves and chop each separately (both are edible). Because chard contains a lot of oxalic acid, it should not be eaten raw (unless leaves are young and very tender). Boiling, steaming, or sauteing are all delicious ways of preparing chard. Because the stems are tougher, they take longer to cook. Consider cooking stems and leaves separately, or starting the stems off first, and adding the leaves about five minutes later.

NUTRITION: Swiss chard is high in Vitamins K, A, and C (as are most dark leafy greens). It also contains a fair amount of magnesium, manganese, iron, and potassium. Swiss chard contains many antioxidants, which can be beneficial for the immune system. It also helps control the amount of sugar in the bloodstream, making it a good choice for diabetics.

PAIRS WELL WITH: marjoram, parsley, allspice, nutmeg, paprika, basil, garlic, ginger, oregano, rosemary
KALE

Kale is the oldest member of the Brassica family and among the earliest cultivated. Though it has been popular in Scotland and Ireland for many centuries, kale has only gained popularity in the United States within the last 10 years. It is versatile in the kitchen and is interchangeable with broccoli and other hearty greens in recipes. Kale is very cold tolerant and is often harvested from the garden long after snow cover.

**HOW TO BUY:** Look for kale leaves that don’t have brown or wilted parts. Inspect the stem ends and avoid bunches with dry, brown, or slimy stems. You can find already chopped kale in many grocery stores these days. Look for bags that don’t have too much condensation inside or any slimy-looking pieces.

**STORAGE:** Kale is hearty enough to stay fresh for a month. To perk up wilted leaves, simply trim a ½” off the bottom of the stem, and place into a glass of water. For an even more ready-to-use kale, wash and spin dry, tear into the desired size (removing the stem) and store in ziplock bags, removing all air before sealing the bag. For long-term storage, kale also freezes well; blanch pieces in boiling water for four minutes. Rinse with cold water to stop the cooking process, drain, and store in an airtight container or bag.

**PREPARATION:** To de-stem kale, grab a stalk of kale, hold it by the stem with one hand and place the pointer or middle finger and thumb of your other hand around the stem just below the leaves. Slide your fingers along the stem, tearing the leaves off. You can also do this by folding the leaf in half lengthwise and cutting the stem out with a knife.

**NUTRITION:** Kale, like many dark leafy greens, is very rich in Vitamins A, C, and the mineral calcium. Kale also has the highest protein content of all of the cultivated vegetables.

**PAIRS WELL WITH:** cumin, dill, marjoram, tarragon, thyme, allspice, coriander, paprika, garlic
SWEET POTATOES

Sweet potatoes are one of only a few cultivated vegetable crops that originated in the Americas. They have been traced back to Peru as early as 8000 B.C. Sweet potatoes are actually not potatoes (or yams as they are commonly mislabeled), they are a member of the morning glory family.

HOW TO BUY: Look for sweet potatoes that feel heavy for their size, without any soft spots, bruises, or signs of sprouting. The skin should have an even color. Small to medium-sized potatoes have a creamier texture. Larger sweet potatoes tend to be starchier.

STORAGE: Sweet potatoes bruise easily, so handle with care. Store in a cool, dry location — like a pantry or garage with ventilation, in a breathable container. Temperatures above 60 degrees can cause them to sprout. Do not store raw sweet potatoes in the refrigerator. Wash skin just prior to use. Once cooked, sweet potatoes will keep for about a week in the refrigerator.

PREPARATION: While most people peel sweet potatoes before cooking, the skins can be left on and are a great source of Vitamin A. Just make sure the skins are well-scrubbed before cooking. Unlike potatoes, sweet potatoes can be eaten raw. They’re also delicious steamed, roasted, sauteed, or baked!

NUTRITION: A lot of a sweet potatoes’ nutrition is found in the skin. The skin is extremely high in Vitamin A. Sweet potatoes also contain a fair amount of Vitamin B6, iron, and magnesium.

PAIRS WELL WITH: leek, sage, thyme, allspice, chili, ginger
WINTER SQUASH

Winter squash comes in a variety of colors, shapes and sizes. However, on the inside, they’re all fairly similar in terms of their coloring and flavor (except for the unique spaghetti squash). Most winter squashes are interchangeable in recipes. Unlike the summer varieties, winter squash originated in South America and eventually found its way north, where it became a staple crop by the early to mid-1800s. Its sweet flavor and hearty storage abilities make it a wonderful winter vegetable to add to your recipe rotation.

HOW TO BUY: Look for squash that is firm and doesn’t have any soft or rotting spots. When choosing squash, go for the small and medium-sized ones of each variety, they usually have a sweeter flavor and are less starchy than the large ones.

STORAGE: Winter squash stores best at 50 degrees in a dark place. Be cautious of humidity, which can induce rot. Spread out squash in a single layer so that they are not touching each other. Rotate and turn occasionally to prevent bruising. Acorn and butternut varieties tend to last the longest. Use up tender varieties like delicata squash first. If stored properly, winter squash will keep for many months. This is why it is so popular in colder climates that experience long winters, like Vermont.

PREPARATION: Wash winter squash; if peeling, peel before cutting open. The skins of delicata squash are edible, but the others are too thick and should be removed. Cut open lengthwise and remove seeds with a spoon. If roasting halved, you can cook them in skins and scoop out the flesh once soft. Squash can be sauteed, boiled, steamed, and roasted.

NUTRITION: Most winter squash is high in fiber, beta-carotene (which the body converts to Vitamin A), potassium, Vitamin C, and magnesium.

PAIRS WELL WITH: marjoram, parsley, sage, rosemary, allspice, curry, ginger, cinnamon
Dairy products are defined as any type of food product made from the milk of mammals. Typically in the United States, this means cow milk, but dairy products can also be made from goat, sheep, water buffalo, or camel milk! Dairy products are consumed around the world, with the exception of some parts of central Africa and East/Southeast Asia. Some products, like buttermilk, yogurt, and kefir are made from milk that’s been soured with a culture. This soured milk can also be made into cheese! Other products are made from the cream (fat) in milk like butter, sour cream, and whipping cream. What’s your favorite dairy product?

**HOW TO BUY:** When purchasing dairy products, check the “sell by” or “best if used by” date to see how long you have to use it.

**STORAGE:** All dairy products should be kept in the refrigerator, though some can be frozen. Dairy that freezes well include: butter (sticks, not spread), milk, yogurt and blocks of hard and semi-hard cheeses (like parmesan, cheddar, gouda and swiss). Once opened, yogurt will keep for about two weeks, milk for about a week, cream cheese for two weeks and cheese for one month.

**PREPARATION:** Once you thaw frozen milk and yogurt, you’ll have to stir or shake them to re-incorporate the solids. Frozen cheese should be used in cooked dishes, as freezing it can change the texture. Serve fresh cheese at the recommended serving temperature, which varies according to type. Do not leave moist cheese, such as ricotta or mozzarella, out of the refrigerator for longer than two hours.

**NUTRITION:** Dairy products contain calcium, potassium, phosphorus, protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin D, and Vitamin B12.

**PAIRS WELL WITH:** fruit, cinnamon, maple syrup, vinegar, vegetables
CABBAGE

Cabbage may be one of the most cultivated of all the plants in the Brassica family (Brassicas include veggies like kale, broccoli, cauliflower, and kohlrabi). There are so many varieties available that cabbage can adapt to a wide array of climates and altitudes. Because of this, it is eaten all around the world.

HOW TO BUY: When selecting, choose heads that are compact and firm. They should have fresh, crispy leaves that do not contain any markings or browning. The head should only contain a few loose outer leaves. In general, the darker green the leaves, the more flavor they have. The stem should be trimmed and look fresh, not dry and cracked. Avoid purchasing pre-cut or shredded cabbage. Once the cabbage is cut it begins to lose its Vitamin C content.

STORAGE: There are two major types of cabbage: fresh eating cabbage and storage cabbage. Fresh eating cabbage is grown and harvested during the summer and early fall. Storage cabbage is harvested just before the first frost in late fall. The name ‘storage’ advertises the truly long shelf life this crop has. Refrain from washing before storage. Make sure to leave all the leaves on the head until just before using. The outer leaves of the cabbage head work to protect the inner and more tender leaves, especially helping with moisture retention. Cabbage stores well in the crisper drawer of the fridge. If properly stored, it can last up to two months.

PREPARATION: Handle your cabbage with care. Remove the outside layer of leaves, then wash in cool water. Cut in half, then in quarters. Remove inner core. Cut lengthwise into ribbons. If you use only a partial head, make sure to tightly wrap the remainder and put in the fridge. Use within a few days, as cut cabbage will dry out quickly.

NUTRITION: Cabbage is high in Vitamin C and Vitamin K and also has a moderate amount of Vitamin B6 and folate.

PAIRS WELL WITH: dill, summer savory, thyme, coriander, curry, ginger, cumin, celery seed, caraway seed, tarragon
MAPLE SYRUP

Maple syrup is one of Vermont’s most well-known and beloved products – the state is the largest maple producer in the United States! It is made by tapping a hole the bark of trees to remove the xylem (sap). The sap is boiled until it turns into a sugary and thick syrup. While most syrup is consumed by North Americans, it is gaining popularity globally, especially in countries like Japan.

HOW TO BUY: Maple syrup is identified by its grade. Recently, the United States and Canada changed their syrup-grading systems to become totally uniform. Today, maple syrup is identified by its color and flavor descriptors. Ranging from lightest to darkest, they are; golden color and delicate taste, amber color and rich taste, dark color and robust taste, and very dark color and strong taste. All of these are now considered ‘Grade A’. Pick your grade of syrup depending on what you intend to use it for. If you plan on using it for cooking or baking, go with a darker syrup, which has a stronger flavor. If your syrup is just for pancakes and french toast, most people prefer a lighter colored syrup, but go with whatever your taste buds prefer!

STORAGE: Unopened containers of maple syrup can be stored in the pantry. Once opened, it’s best to store syrup in the fridge long-term unless you plan on using it up quickly!

PREPARATION: In addition to using syrup on your weekend pancakes, consider using maple syrup or maple sugar as a replacement sweetener for baking and cooking. Try some in a stir-fry sauce, to sweeten your lemonade, or in a homemade salad dressing!

NUTRITION: Maple syrup is sugar, so it’s best to consume it in moderation. However, compared to other natural sweeteners, maple syrup contains the most vitamins & minerals. It is high in calcium, potassium, manganese, and magnesium. It also contains antioxidants, which generally support the immune system and may help prevent cancer.

PAIRS WELL WITH: cinnamon, cardamom, thyme, nutmeg, brie cheese, bacon, dijon mustard, rosemary, ginger, lemon, sweet potatoes
CARROTS

Carrots are a family favorite and a staple in many households. They are sweet and crisp, the perfect combination to keep you coming back for more! Carrots originated in Central Asia and were first cultivated by people in Afghanistan. The first varieties were purple and pale yellow. It wasn’t until carrots were brought to Europe that the now-classic orange color was developed. That started in the Netherlands where growers supposedly cultivated the orange variety to honor the king.

HOW TO BUY: Look for carrots that are brightly colored, smooth, and firm to the touch. Avoid carrots with large cracks or splits.

STORAGE: Remove greens and refrigerate in an unsealed plastic bag. This will help them retain enough moisture while still being able to breathe. Carrots will keep for several weeks in the crisper drawer of the fridge. Do not wash until you are ready to use.

PREPARATION: Scrub carrots clean with a vegetable brush under running water. There’s no need to peel them unless you’re removing damaged parts. Fresh carrot greens can be washed and chopped to be eaten raw or cooked.

NUTRITION: Carrots are high in Vitamin A and beta-carotene. They’re also a good source of fiber, calcium, and potassium and contain trace minerals.

PAIRS WELL WITH: celery, garlic, ginger, dill, shallots, onions, peas, capers, cumin, maple syrup
RADISHES

Radishes vary in size, shape, color, and pungency – from the classic Cherry Belle to Black Spanish. Radishes were widely eaten in Israel and Greece and were popular throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. Radishes are one of the first crops ready at the beginning of the growing season and are a wonderful accompaniment to spring greens. And at the end of the season, winter radishes are a welcome pop of color.

HOW TO BUY: Look for radishes that are smooth, firm, and brightly colored. Avoid radishes that have brown scars or if the tops are wilted and yellow.

STORAGE: Remove radish greens. These can be wrapped in a damp towel and stored in the drawer of your fridge. The radish bulbs should be stored in plastic or wrapped in a damp towel in the fridge for up to two weeks. Do not wash until ready to use.

PREPARATION: Scrub radish bulbs with a vegetable brush under running water to remove dirt. No need to peel. Trim off any damaged areas. Enjoy them raw, or cook them to tone down their peppery bite. Most varieties of radishes are interchangeable in recipes, though pungency levels vary. Rinse radish greens and pat dry – these can be cooked in stir-fries or soups.

NUTRITION: Radishes bulbs are mostly water. They’re beneficial as blood cleansers and as a digestive aid. Radish bulbs contain a small amount of potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and iron. The greens, however, are an excellent source of Vitamins A, C, and the Bs, as is the case for many dark leafy greens.

PAIRS WELL WITH: chives, dill, basil, parsley, mint, butter, lettuce, mild fish, smoked salmon, lettuce, cheese, cucumbers
MIXED GREENS

There are so many types of greens that we eat. Some are fantastic raw, others are better cooked, and some are tasty either way! In addition to variations in color and shape, greens also vary in their pungency — some are mild, while others have distinctive bitter, spicy, or mustardy flavors. Popular cooking greens include arugula, collards, kale, mustard greens, turnip greens, and beet greens. Varieties that are common in raw salad mixes include lettuce, chicory, escarole, watercress, Asian greens (like tatsoi and mizuna), baby kale, baby spinach, and baby beet greens.

HOW TO BUY: When buying whole heads of lettuce, look for clean, fresh cut ends. You don’t want anything that looks rusty, dried out or wilted. If you’re searching for packaged greens, look for containers that don’t have a lot of moisture and condensation. Avoid any containers that have slimy or wilted-looking greens.

STORAGE: If you’ve purchased a whole head of lettuce, wash and dry the leaves immediately (a salad spinner is helpful for this). If leaves are very dirty, soak in cold water for a few minutes to get all of the grit off. Wrap individual leaves in a kitchen towel or paper towel and store in a plastic bag. Greens should keep for a week in the crisper drawer of your fridge this way. These days, many of the greens we buy in the grocery store are pre-washed and dry. Keep these in their container and use within one week. Greens for cooking also freeze well. Blanch greens in boiling water for 2-3 minutes. Rinse in cold water to stop the cooking process. Drain, and pack into airtight containers. These will store well in the freezer for up to six months.

PREPARATION: If you’re using greens for a salad, then there’s not much to prepare. Toss greens with dressing at the last minute to avoid sogginess. But don’t forget, you can put mixed greens in all kinds of cooked dishes as well. Saute greens for two to five minutes as a side dish or add to a stir-fry at the last few minutes of cooking. Try adding cooked greens to quiches, lasagna, or other baked dishes! Also, consider cooking them in soups and stews for added nutrition and color!

NUTRITION: Greens are packed with nutrition! They offer generous amounts of Vitamin A, Vitamin C, and some B vitamins, as well as folic acid, calcium, and iron. They are high in dietary fiber.

PAIRS WELL WITH: fresh herbs, garlic, onion, vinegar, olive oil, lemon
CUCUMBERS

Cucumbers were first cultivated in India over 3,000 years ago. Nowadays, many cultures use cucumbers in their cuisine. They are a classic summer vegetable — they flourish off of the heat. Cucumbers are wonderfully refreshing and crisp. They can be added to any salad or sandwich for some extra crunch!

HOW TO BUY: Look for firm cucumbers without soft spots or blemishes. Also, avoid ones with wrinkles, which is an indication that they’ve been stored for too long and have lost some of their moisture.

Most grocery stores will wax their cucumbers or enclose them in plastic to retain their moisture. Organic cucumbers are required to use non-synthetic waxes approved under organic guidelines. Unwaxed varieties can usually be found at co-ops, natural food stores, and farmers markets.

STORAGE: Refrigeration is necessary for cucumbers to retain their moisture. If your cucumbers come wrapped tightly, cut open the package a little to give them room to breathe. Store in the crisper drawer of the fridge and they will keep up to one week. Use up leftovers as soon as possible — a partially cut or peeled cucumber will deteriorate quickly.

PREPARATION: There’s no need to peel cucumbers unless the skins are waxed. Wash under running water to remove any grit. If a recipe calls for the seeds to be removed, slice the cucumber lengthwise, then run a spoon down the center, removing the seeds. Slice or dice as the recipe requests.

NUTRITION: Cucumbers are 95% water and contain small amounts of Vitamins A, C, and a few minerals. They are also surprisingly rich in Vitamin E, which may be why cucumbers are a great skin conditioner and are often found in bath products.

PAIRS WELL WITH: basil, dill, parsley, mint, tarragon, allspice, coriander, mustard
MELONS

Melons are part of the Cucurbit family (related to cucumbers, squash and gourds) and originated in Africa. Early European settlers in North America reported growing melons as early as 1600. The most popular varieties are honeydew, cantaloupe, and watermelon. There’s a lot of variation in these three types of melons. Keep an eye out at your local farmers market or natural foods store for the less common yellow and orange-fleshed watermelons!

HOW TO BUY: Some of the smaller melon varieties, like cantaloupe and honeydew, are very fragrant when ripe. If it smells sweet and musky, it’s good to go. Watermelon ripeness is harder to gauge, but a good way to test is to use your knuckle to knock on the skin. If it sounds hollow, it’s likely ripe. Avoid melons with soft spots.

STORAGE: Muskmelons (like cantaloupe and honeydew) will continue to ripen off the vine at room temperature. So if you have a whole melon that isn’t ripe yet, or that you’re not ready to use, store at room temperature. Watermelon will not ripen once it’s picked, so you can store whole watermelons in the fridge. Refrigerate cut melon and store in an airtight container. It will stay fresh for up to a week. Wrap cut halves tightly with plastic and refrigerate.

PREPARATION: Wash gently under running water and pat dry. For muskmelons, cut in half, then use a spoon to scoop seeds out of the center. Cut crosswise into slices or lengthwise into wedges. If you have a watermelon with seeds, there’s no quick way to remove them all. Simply cut into wedges. The more you cut melon, the more it will release its juice. So keep chunks big to prevent this. If you cut into a melon only to find that it’s over-ripe, try freezing it in chunks to put in a smoothie later!

NUTRITION: Melons are a great source of Vitamin A and C, as well as potassium and other minerals. They are hydrating, which is why many of us crave melon on a hot summer day. Melons also contain antioxidants, which support the immune system.

PAIRS WELL WITH: cilantro, mint, parsley, thyme, ginger, chili, black pepper, feta, berries, citrus, prosciutto
MORE RESOURCES

Visit the Vermont Harvest of the Month website for more resources on each of the crops featured in this guide. www.vermontharvestofthemonth.org

OTHER RESOURCES:

Fruit & Vegetable Preparation Guide from The Spruce:

Produce Storage Guide from Concord Co-Op: