

Farm-style Fast Food

If the growing season has you too busy to prepare well-planned meals every night, follow these tips for healthy “fast-food” eating.

by Lisa Kivirist

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These recipes are great fast foods that use fresh produce right out of the garden: Chargrilled Herbed Vegetables and Chicken Quick Summer Harvest Pizza

Summertime garden abundance ushers in a sense of irony for us hobby farmers: The time of year when we are up to our ears in fresh, tasty, nutritious produce is also the busiest season when our garden- and farm-chore lists run long.

To paraphrase Charles Dickens, summer oddly ranks the “best of times and worst of times” for farmers. We’re surrounded by fresh produce, but we don’t have time to cook it.

If you take the same approach to summer eating as you do in your garden—have a plan and be prepared—you can eat well all season long.

From the Pages of

Hobby Farm Home Just as you plot in early spring how many rows of potatoes to plant, thoughtful planning for what you’re going to eat that day (and week) ensures healthier dining. Such planning doesn’t need to take much time or effort, yet it goes a long way to take advantage of peak summer flavors.

Need another reason to eat healthy during the busy growing season? Caring for your body enables you to keep up with the physical demands of farm life.

“When summer chores peak in demand on one’s body, farmers need to prioritize taking care of themselves, particularly remembering to make healthy food choices,” advises Angie Tagtow, an environmental nutritionist based in Iowa and a leading advocate championing public access to fresh, affordable, sustainably raised food. “Develop an eating plan that works for you, keeping nourished while taking advantage of the healthy bounty in your garden.”

Take the Boy Scout approach to eating this season: Be prepared and have a plan. Here are some tips to get you started:

Eat Fresh and Simple

Identify what will be in abundance in the garden each week, and plan your main meals around those items. It sounds like basic advice, but this can be a key variable in eating healthy during the peak summer season.

“Fresh foods contain the highest nutrient value,” says Tagtow. “No matter what form of food preservation you use, from freezing to canning, nothing beats the nutritional power punch in local produce harvested from your own garden.” (Read other farmers’ tips about eating fresh foods.)

Sundays can be a good day to plot your fresh-eating plan for the week, taking advantage of the slower weekend before Monday’s busyness kicks in.

What will need harvesting and what are you in the mood to eat? Focus on showcasing the robust flavors of ripe produce, and you’ll find you don’t need to spend much time in the kitchen. Save the complicated casseroles and soufflés for the winter months when you have more time to relish something slow-simmering on the stove.

“Most of my family’s summertime meals are quite simple and take little time to prepare,” says Deb Eschmeyer, an Ohio farmer who raises the bulk of her produce needs in her own garden. “From fresh greens to a perfectly ripe tomato, garden-fresh flavors often taste best simply on their own.”

To make a more complicated dish, use Sunday afternoon and cook a double batch so you'll have leftovers throughout the week.

My husband, John, is our family's pesto maker. He'll make a big batch, harvesting two 5-gallon buckets of basil. He'll pluck the leaves, wash them and then prepare a pesto batch, freezing some and setting aside a sealed container to use as a sandwich spread or on top of noodles—easy, flavorful and nutritious to eat throughout the week.

Sometimes I get into "squirrel mode" and focus on packing food away and preserving the harvest instead of enjoying the fresh bounty when it's available.

For example, we have about two weeks on our Wisconsin farm when the strawberry patch goes crazy. I get so busy freezing and making jam that I forget to satisfy my fresh-berry cravings. Some of these precious produce items, like strawberries, arrive for only a brief visit; I need to remember to take full advantage and use this time to make fresh strawberry pancakes, strawberries and cream, and strawberry and rhubarb pie.

Add Protein

Think of protein as fuel for your muscles. When we wake up sore after a day of power weeding, we vividly appreciate the important role muscles play in running our farms.

"Remember to add protein to your meals to provide necessary nutrients for your muscles," says Tagtow. "While most of our summer eating comes direct from our garden, protein may be the item you purchase and add to your meals, such as cheese, nuts, meats, yogurt and tofu."

You can add protein to your meal by tossing nuts into a salad, adding cheese slices on top of fresh tomato wedges and serving crunchy pea pods with a yogurt dip.

Eat Breakfast

For generations, mothers have been nagging kids to eat something to start the day, and there's a sound nutritional reason for that. Breakfast serves as our "fuel for the day," and should include a combination of complex carbohydrates, protein and fat to provide balanced nutrition while slowing down digestion, enabling you to feel full longer.

Choose breads made with whole grains since these have more fiber and nutrients than items made from white, refined, processed flour.

Eliminate those 10 o'clock hunger pangs when you eat a well-planned breakfast, such as:

Carb: fresh fruit

Protein: yogurt

Fat: granola

Carb: whole-wheat toast

Protein and fat: peanut butter

Carb: whole-wheat tortilla

Protein and fat: scrambled egg and shredded cheese

Plan for Snacks

However you slice it, farmers need extra snacks to get through a busy summer day. Think of a snack as an extra energy boost—a mother lode of nutrients to fuel you until the next meal.

Planning ahead makes all the difference between having healthy fuel options or falling into the dark side of snacking, grabbing whatever processed, refined item is lying around the kitchen.

Aim for carbohydrates and protein combinations in your snacks, tapping into that same idea for breakfast. Homemade trail mix is a great snack option and can easily be made ahead of time and stored in the pantry for later. Commercial, pre-made trail mix often uses additives and preservatives.

A healthy combination of good fiber and good fats, homemade trail mix can be tailored to your preference and tastes. Try dehydrating some fruit from this year's garden; strawberries work well. (Try the Farmer Fuel Trail Mix for a great snack.)

Drink Water

You remember to water the garden. Don't forget to keep yourself hydrated, too.

Continue drinking water throughout the day, especially when you're working outside in the hot sun. Use a stainless-steel or aluminum water bottle. These eliminate bottle waste; millions of plastic bottles end up in landfills annually. Take a small cooler of water bottles to the field with you, and you'll have easy access to refreshing, cold water just as the mercury peaks.

Avoid drinking water directly from the garden hose. "As the hose sits outside and bakes in the sun, toxins can leach out from the hose into the water," explains Tagtow. "Keep it safe, and use a water bottle filled with kitchen tap water."

Another healthy water tip: Remember to test your well water annually to ensure safe drinking water.

Focusing on healthy summer eating celebrates the heart of farm life: Caring for the land while still caring for yourself add up to the magical "good life" we came to the farm to find. Enjoy the season, with a little planning and protein on the side.

About the author: Lisa Kivirist is the co-author of *ECOprenuring* (New Society Publishers, 2008) and *Rural Renaissance* (New Society Publishers, 2009) and is a W.K. Kellogg Food and Society Policy Fellow. You can find her eating pea pods off the vine on her Wisconsin farm and B&B, Inn Serendipity.

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