

Van Hage Garden Article

Eat Well – Be Well

‘Growing your own 5-A-Day’

Evidence shows that people who eat plenty of fruit and vegetables are at a lower risk of developing chronic debilitating diseases, such as coronary heart disease and some forms of cancer. Though, perhaps it isn't surprising that the foods we choose to eat have such a bearing on our health – we do have the opportunity to make the conscious decision to boost our body's general wellbeing by opting to grow some fresh produce and supplement our healthy needs.

As essential ‘staple’ ingredients of our diets, fruit and vegetables are naturally low in fat and contain almost no sodium (salt) – so if you're feeling a little worse for wear after the festive season and your body could do with a lift, perhaps it's time to eat your way back to better health?

Though food-fads change, the essential messages regarding healthy eating have stood the test of time. Eating healthily doesn't have to mean cutting out all your favourite foodstuffs in one go – it's more a case of setting the balance straight.

Many of us are aware of the importance of eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables daily – though most of us still aren't consuming enough. The familiar adage of ‘5-A-Day’ is easier to achieve than you might think, especially if you're able to supplement organic shop-bought produce with home-grown seasonal delicacies.

Throughout the day, try adding up your portions to see how you score? Try a glass of freshly squeezed juice (fruit or vegetable) and a banana (or dried fruit) with your breakfast cereal. A homegrown mixed leaf and tomato salad at lunch, perhaps with new potatoes or mixed beans. A freshly picked apple, pear, peach or fig as an afternoon snack, before your evening meal of delicious asparagus, corn on the cob, sprouting broccoli or sweet garden peas – as the season dictates. Why not round off your meal with mixed summer berries or fresh fruit pie using cherries or the last of the garden's windfall apples?

Of course, you can choose from fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or juiced fruit and vegetables for your daily intake – but imagine how much more satisfying to your pallet and comforting to your wallet it is knowing how your food was produced, while at the same time benefiting from the gentle exercise and fresh air of cultivation, to sharpen a healthy appetite?

As a rough guide, fruit and vegetables should make up about one third of the food on our plates. In addition, a healthy balanced diet needs to contain a variety of other food types, such as ‘starchy’ wholemeal bread and cereals, protein-rich meat, fish, eggs and lentils; supplemented by a smaller amount of milk and dairy produce.

Consider also, how you choose to prepare and cook your fruit and vegetables to gain maximum benefit from every nutritious mouthful. Many vitamins and minerals are easily lost during the storing and cooking process, so endeavour to use fresh produce as soon after gathering or purchase as possible.

- Keep vegetables chilled once picked or purchased fresh. Avoid leaving exposed to the

open air, light or heat once cut. Never soak cut produce as vitamins and minerals are quickly leached away.

- Use as little water as possible when cooking both fruit and vegetables. Re-use the cooking water for sauces and soups to recapture lost vitamins and minerals.
- Avoid overcooking. Steaming or using a microwave not only speeds up the cooking process, but also preserves natural goodness and flavour.
- Steer clear of re-heating or prolonged cooking of fruit and veg as vitamin levels begin to drop within a few minutes – eat as soon as ready.

Winter Warmers

These days, the majority of root vegetables are available all year round from the supermarkets, but when dug fresh from the garden, winter is their season of glory. Perfect for making hearty warming soups, stews and casseroles, they are also a delicious addition to roast meats and pies.

Packed with vitamins and minerals, root vegetables are generally the cheapest fresh produce to buy and rewardingly easy to grow at home. Beetroot, carrots, celeriac, Jerusalem artichokes, parsnips, turnips and swede all fall into this category. Though potatoes are strictly speaking a 'root vegetable' too, they also contain high levels of starch and are therefore not considered as one of your '5-A-Day', rather a natural and healthy source of starchy nutrients, to be eaten in place of bread, rice or pasta.

IN THE GARDEN THIS WEEK...

- Perusing the latest seed catalogues is a great way to fire enthusiasm for the gardening year ahead. The excitement of discovering new and tempting varieties to squeeze into flower borders, greenhouse and vegetable garden, is often all it takes to spark the urge to begin digging once more.
- Cover rhubarb crowns with terracotta forcers to begin the process of producing tender low-acidity sticks for pulling weeks ahead of the main crop.
- Be ready for supporting tall growing plants and climbing sweet peas by cutting fresh 'pea stick' material from coppiced hazel, beech hedges or surplus boughs of birch.
- Fallen leaves decompose quickly on moist garden soil. Tidy wind-blown piles from the corners of the garden and layer under mature shrubs. Take the opportunity of a little gentle winter exercise on a mild day to 'turn' the compost heap, mixing the layers to speed the rotting process.