

## Freezing Fruits and Veggies

*With so many people in our country struggling with food insecurity, it's difficult to imagine that an estimated 40% of food in the US gets tossed in the garbage, rather than eaten. That totals nearly \$165 billion in wasted food. One recent study estimates that just 15% of this wasted food would be enough to feed 25 million Americans. There's many reasons this food gets wasted: from "stocking-up" because of a great sale price, getting extra fresh produce from the food pantry, to collecting a large crop from your garden that you simply can't eat in time. But next time you're about to toss that bunch of browning bananas, or empty the produce drawer that's full of zucchini or spinach, you could consider freezing them instead. Many foods can be frozen for months! See the chart below for instructions on how to best preserve fruits and veggies through freezing.*

### Preparing Produce for Freezing

Many vegetables should be blanched before freezing for best results. Blanching involves cooking something in boiling water very briefly, then transferring it to ice water to stop the cooking process. Blanching serves to slow the loss of flavor, color, texture, and nutrients. Freezing veggies without blanching is perfectly safe, but the texture may not be ideal. Before blanching, rinse the produce. If you're freezing without blanching, the produce should be dry before freezing. The blanching time on the chart below refers to how long the produce should be boiled for before being removed with a slotted spoon and cooled in ice water. After you've blanched the fruits or vegetables, drain well and pat dry. Arrange them in a single layer on a baking sheet and freeze overnight. The next day, you can move the frozen produce into a freezer-safe bag—squeeze out all the air before sealing. If you do too much at a time, your freezer won't be able to keep up and food will take too long to freeze, which could make it mushy. Fruits will maintain their quality for six months in the freezer; vegetables will last at top quality about a year. Though fruits and veggies can be safely kept for longer, the taste and texture may not be as satisfying.

Frozen fruits are great for smoothies. Previously frozen bananas can be used for baking, as in banana bread and banana pancakes. The vegetables will make a quick and easy addition to stir fries, soups, stews, and pasta sauces. While the freezing process takes a little bit of time, you'll be grateful for the prepared food in the freezer on a busy evening!

Fruit or Vegetable	Preparation	Blanching Time
Bell peppers	Cut out stem and seeds. Cut into 1/2 inch pieces.	2-3 minutes
Broccoli or cauliflower	Cut into 1 to 1½ inch florets	3 minutes
Carrots	Peel and cut into 1/4 inch slices	2 minutes
Leafy greens (spinach, collards, kale, Swiss chard - EXCEPT lettuce)	Remove any tough stems or ribs. Chop.	2-3 minutes
Corn	Remove husks and cut kernels off of cob.	2 minutes
Green beans	Trim ends.	3 minutes
Onions	Cut into rings 1/2 inch wide.	10-15 seconds
Summer squash/zucchini	Cut into 1/2 inch slices	1-2 minutes
Tomatoes	Remove core	Not needed
Winter squash	Cut in half. Remove seeds and stringy membrane. Place cut-side down on baking sheet coated with oil. Bake at 400°F until tender. Scoop out squash, mash.	Not needed
Blackberries, raspberries, blueberries	Remove any stems or leaves.	Not needed
Bananas	Peel and cut into chunks. Great for smoothies.	Not needed
Nectarines, peaches, plums	Remove pit and slice into sixths	Not needed
Strawberries	Remove stems and hull. Cut large berries in half.	Not needed