The “How-To” Guide on Extending the Shelf Life on Produce

We all experience it — the initial excitement that comes from seeing fresh produce available at the food bank and then the associated anxiety that it won’t last until your next distribution. The obvious solution for your pantry is to increase your distribution days – it’s really important that clients can access your pantry at times that are convenient for them plus it allows you to move perishables much quicker. But what if this is just not an option for your agency? What can you do to make sure that the produce does not have to be thrown away?

Even though fresh produce does inherently warrant some sense of urgency, you can extend its shelf life longer than you think largely by having the correct storage conditions. Below are 10 tips on how to make the most of your fresh produce pickups from Feeding Tampa Bay.

1. **Remove excess moisture.**
   If vegetables are wet make sure to pat them dry before storing. You can also wrap produce in a lint-free kitchen towel or line the storage bag with a paper towel to absorb any remaining moisture.

2. **Don’t just place items in the fridge.**
   Produce needs some protection from the cold conditions in the refrigerator. Place items in a plastic produce bag or zip-top bags, or wrap produce in a lint-free kitchen towel.

3. **Think about placement in the fridge.**
   Don’t place produce in the back of the refrigerator, where it can be too cold and sometimes icy.

4. **Store items some items out of the refrigerator.**
   Some fresh produce should not be placed in refrigeration but rather lasts longer in a cool, dry place where it won’t receive direct sun. These fruits and vegetables include:
   - Apples
   - Nectarines
   - Eggplant
   - Lemons
   - Onions
   - Plums
   - Potatoes
   - Peaches
   - Garlic
   - Limes
   - Oranges
   - Tomatoes
   - Watermelon
   - Cucumbers
   - Ginger
   - Mangos
   - Pears
   - Pineapple

5. **Fruits and vegetables don’t play well together so store them separately.**
   Why should you store different types of produce separately? Many fruits produce an odorless, colorless gas called ethylene gas which acts like a ripening hormone and can speed spoilage.

6. **Vegetables need to breathe.**
   Poke holes in the plastic bags you store them in, or keep them in re-useable mesh bags. An airtight plastic bag is the worst choice for storing vegetables. Also don’t pack veggies tightly together either; they need space for air circulation or they’ll spoil faster.

7. **Roots, greens, lettuces, and herbs can be shocked in ice water and quite literally, revived.**
   Fill a bowl with ice water and place veggies in the bowl for about 10 minutes. For vegetables that aren’t too far gone, you will be amazed at the results. You can also cut stems and place them upright in water, like flowers. Place them, covered with a plastic bag or kitchen towel, back in the fridge.

8. **Don’t clean produce until you’re ready to use it.**
   Washing fruits or vegetables before storing them makes them more likely to spoil, because dampness encourages bacteria growth. However, always remind your clients about the importance of washing fruits and vegetables before eating.

9. **Check your produce during storage.**
   It’s always a good idea to keep tabs on your produce. Make sure to change out the bag or towel if too much moisture has accumulated. Trim or remove any wilted parts, or brown, yellow, soft, or moldy spots to get a little more life out of them. Refrigerate the vegetables again. For items that don’t require refrigerating, like tomatoes, pull and toss any that are starting to shrivel.

10. **Share these tips with your clients.**
    Not only can your pantry prolong the life of produce by following these tips, but your clients can too! By following guide and reminding your clients about proper produce storage guidelines, your pantry will be making a bee-line towards the produce section first next time you come to the food bank!
This past month, the Tampa Bay community rose to the challenge and exceeded everyone's expectations when a small food drive turned into a “cereal-iously” huge success! During the last weeks of April and start of May, Feeding Tampa Bay partnered with 10News WTSP to fight summer hunger. Summer is supposed to be a care-free time when kids and families enjoy themselves, but for many of those we serve, families become more stressed out because kids aren’t receiving the free meals at school that they normally do during the school year. At a request for cereal so no kid goes hungry, the Tampa Bay community came out in full force and raised over 20,000 boxes of cereal and over $5,000 to fight summer hunger! Special thanks to 10News WTSP who made this possible!

Meet Jack, Feeding Tampa Bay’s Senior Administrative Assistant. Jack has been with the food bank longer than any other employee. In fact, he’s been with the food bank for over 16 years! As such he’s been in the unique position to watch the food bank grow and evolve into what it is today. Not only does that give him years of expertise and knowledge that he uses when helping different departments at Feeding Tampa Bay, but it also makes him our food bank historian! Jack started at the food bank as a volunteer in the sorting area before he was quickly asked to join the team as a staff member. To this position he brought an abundance of experience including his background as a veteran, nurse, secretary, and traveler. He’s been to all 50 states and 7 countries!