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Preparing Fruit and Vegetables to peel or not to peel - that is the question

Everyone seems to have an opinion on nutrition, particularly when it comes to fruit and vegetables. A common school of thought is that fresh is best. Of course, not all produce arrives directly from the farm. Types that are out of season are still readily available, perhaps shipped from overseas, or are last year's crops that were picked locally when almost ripe then placed in cold-storage. Despite the fact that some doesn't have the full flavour of the genuine fresh, it is arguably healthier than processed food.

We know that all fresh fruit and vegetables should be washed prior to eating, whether cooked or raw; but what about peeling the outer skin? Some insist that removing the outside is to take away the best part. Let's think seriously about that. Remember the advice to kids - don't pick that up: you don't know where it's been! Now apply this to fruit and vegies.

Initially, they came from the farm or orchard, most going through a washing or brushing process before ending up in the shops; and in a few cases fruit is sprayed with wax so that it looks nice and shiny. Mechanical washing would remove some, but not all of the undesirable elements that are definitely not nutritious - I have no idea where the wax sits in this equation. Admittedly, farming practices have changed over the years and many chemical sprays and soil additives have been banned because they were discovered to be injurious to health. Unfortunately, even though they are no longer used, some like DDT and Dieldrin can remain in the soil for years, so any crop planted in that same soil, especially root vegies like carrots, turnips, swedes, potatoes, etcetera are likely to have traces of these dangerous substances on the skins. And don't forget the obligatory fertilisers.

In spite of the risk to consumers, milder poisons continue to be used with the Health Department's blessing, ensuring that insect and fungal attacks are kept at bay. Then you don't have to worry about codling-moth grubs in your pears and caterpillars in the salad. In many cases, the chemicals used to deter these pests, including the really bad ones that are claimed to be no longer around, have contacted the skins and may still be present in a residual form. Milder the current sprays may be; poisonous to humans they will ever remain. One way to keep them out of the stew-pot and your own system is to remove the part most likely to retain suspect elements - and that means the peel.

I can almost hear the cries of those healthy eaters who only buy organic food and insist that what I'm saying doesn't apply to them. They could well be right, provided that their fruit and vegies were raised in a controlled environment that excludes outside contaminants; and provided also that growing mediums were synthetic and contained no soils, sands, bark fines, charcoal, peat or other additives that were brought in from the real world. As for cultivating your own, even specially mixed growing mediums available

from nurseries and other sources aren't exempt - they are made up using ingredients that may or not be as clean and poison-free as nature intended; and many contain some forms of chemical fertilisers.

So, why take the risk? Simply remove the outer skins of vegetables and fruit before eating. The same applies to cabbage and lettuces - take off the outer leaves, wash the remainder and allow to drain before consigning to the fridge as per: "**Keeping lettuce and cabbage longer**" in **Handy Hints**.

In his wisdom, my Granddad used to say: "You've got to eat a bit of dirt before you die." Maybe he was right, but I'd prefer not to leave this world as a direct result of eating whatever else is lurking in it!

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