

From the University of Mississippi Medical Center Division of Public Affairs

VEG OUT FOR HEALTH AT FARMER'S MARKETS, UMMC EXPERTS SAY

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JACKSON, Miss. – As Mississippi's farmer's markets gear up for the biggest weeks of the summer, University of Mississippi Medical Center food experts are helping shoppers zero in on the healthiest choices among the bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables.

They've come up with their personal top five list of what's most nutritious and why, and many of their favorites can be purchased at the market nearest you.

Blueberries, one of the state's largest fruit crops, are the overwhelming favorite of Cathy Taylor, UMMC's assistant director of food and nutrition services, and Paul Robertson, a registered dietitian and nutritionist who teaches a variety of patients about healthy lifestyles.

"They're high in anti-oxidants, which helps your immune system," said Taylor, who makes sure UMMC patients, faculty and students have daily access to a variety of healthy dining options. She also uses an array of fresh fruits and veggies in the hospital's catering program.

"With blueberries, you have no waste at all," Taylor said. "And, they're pretty. There are all kinds of uses for blueberries."

Rounding out Taylor's top five list are zucchini and yellow squash, high in vitamins A and C, manganese and magnesium to help thwart heart disease; tomatoes rich in lycopene, a vital anti-oxidant that helps fight cancerous cells and other kinds of health complications and diseases; melons with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant qualities; and asparagus, a rich source of glutathione, which helps break down carcinogens and other harmful compounds.

Higher consumption of vegetables in general may protect against some diseases, including some types of cancer, the National Cancer Institute of the National Institutes of Health says.

Go to the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce's website, and there's a county-by-county listing of farmer's markets. One of the largest is the Mississippi Farmers Market on High Street at the Mississippi Fairgrounds in Jackson. The Old Farmers Market on Woodrow Wilson Avenue is located minutes away between UMMC and the Jackson Medical Mall.

Farmer's market specialists and vendors say the next month will hold an abundance of fresh, leafy green vegetables. Look for blueberries, sugar snap peas, bib lettuce, kohlrabi, zucchini, squash, Brussels sprouts, Swiss chard, dandelion greens and fresh herbs including parsley and cilantro. Strawberries have a few more weeks before that season winds down, said Mississippi Farmers Market manager Frank Malta.

"People are looking for good tomatoes. The grocery store tomatoes are red on the outside, but taste like cardboard on the inside," said Old Farmer's Market vendor Brenda Langham, whose Cockrell family in Smith County has operated a stand there for 64 years.

Also available are baby beets, green garlic, green beans, new potatoes, cherry and grape tomatoes, arugula, kale, cabbage, mustard and collard greens, turnips, bell peppers, sweet potatoes, carrots and herbs including parsley and cilantro.

"I love the farmer's market. They're local, and the nutritional content is great," said UMMC registered dietitian Dacia Breeden. Asparagus is the first thing she'd buy, and her other top choices are fresh peas, zucchini, strawberries and sweet potatoes.

"All are loaded with vitamins, minerals and fiber, and those are things you just don't get enough of in your diet," Breeden said. "Farmer's markets are a good way to make you get those things. At the grocery store, the packaged things call out to you."

Robertson's top five rounds out with tomatoes, broccoli, different colors of bell pepper, and either kale or sweet potatoes. "Fresh is always the best," Robertson said. "That's what I tell my patients. You will get a better nutritional value out of it if it's fresh."

"The quality is so much better. The appearance is better. The taste is better. The texture is better," Taylor said.

Nutrients are often lost during the canning process, and the addition of salt and sugar makes canned fruits and veggies even less healthy, Robertson said. "Frozen isn't bad, but watch out for the sugars that are added as flavor enhancers."

He encourages farmer's market fans to go for an assortment of colors. "We need color variety because they have different antioxidants," Robertson said. "Get your darker, intense colors through vegetables, and find a creative way to incorporate them into your meal plan."

"You can't beat a good tomato," Taylor said. "And, a lot of caterers during this time of year use zucchini and yellow squash, and yellow and red peppers. Grill them or roast them in the oven."

Breeden encourages those who eat more canned than fresh to give farmer's markets a try.

"I tell my patients that you don't have to buy a lot at a time," she said. "Just pick one. Build on what you like, and try something different next time. Your body will thank you for it."

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