

Corn: Veggie or grain? That all depends

By Mary Welch-Bezemek, Special to this Newspaper | Posted: Thursday, June 9, 2016 12:10 am

This week in the fruit and vegetable series we will be looking at the vegetable corn. What food is more synonymous with summer than freshly picked corn on the cob? Corn grows in “ears” each of which is covered in rows of kernels that are then protected by the corn silk and encased in a husk.

Traditionally, corn is known as maize by many cultures throughout the world. Although we often associate corn with the color yellow, it actually comes in many varieties with an array of different colors. The colors include: red, pink, black, purple and blue. Although corn is now available in markets year-round, it is the locally grown varieties that you can purchase during the summer months that not only taste the best, but are usually the least expensive.

A unique fact about corn is that the kernels you eat off the cob (or purchase canned or frozen) are classified as vegetables, but if you dry and pop those kernels into popcorn it is considered a grain. Corn is also a nutritional powerhouse, rich in antioxidants and fiber. If you’re looking for a yellow or white vegetable to add to your veggie rainbow, corn offers a lot of nutritional value. One medium ear of corn contains 80 calories, 3 grams of protein, 19 grams of carbohydrates, 1 gram of fat and 54 grams of water.

While it might sound surprising to some people who are used to thinking about corn as a plain, staple food, or a snack food, or a summertime party food, corn is actually a unique phytonutrient-rich food that provides us with well-documented antioxidant benefits. As we know, increasing one’s antioxidant intake is essential for optimum health and may protect us against heart problems, mood disorders and immune system problems (such as certain types of cancer and immune deficiency disorders).

Corn also has great digestive benefits. Anyone who has eaten fresh corn-on-the-cob or freshly popped popcorn knows how satisfying this food can be. At 4.6 grams of fiber per cup, corn is a



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good fiber source, and in research studies, corn intake is often associated with good overall fiber intake.

In countries outside the U.S., numerous studies have examined the ability of corn to improve overall nourishment, especially when combined with legumes. Researchers conducting these studies have been interested in absorption of minerals like zinc, calcium and iron, as well as overall energy and protein intake. Maize (corn) and bean meals have been shown to help improve overall nutrient status and to help provide outstanding nutrient richness in the diet.

From a food safety standpoint, when shopping in the grocery store, your safest bet is to purchase corn that is being displayed in a refrigerated produce bin or in a cool store location, out of direct sun and not near a heat source. These same recommendations apply for corn in a farmer's market or roadside stand.

Look for corn whose husks are fresh and green and not dried out. To examine the kernels, gently pull back on part of the husk. The kernels should be plump and tightly arranged in rows. Corn will stay fresh in the refrigerator in an air-tight container or tightly wrapped plastic bag for 2-3 days. Do not remove its husk since this will protect its flavor. Fresh corn freezes well if placed in heavy-duty freezer bags.

In conclusion, corn has gathered a diverse reputation in the United States. For some people, corn is a "staple" food that provides the foundation for tortillas, burritos or polenta. For others, corn is a "snack" food that comes in the form of popcorn and corn chips. For still others, corn is a "special summertime food" that is essential at barbecues and cookouts. But regardless of its reputation, corn is seldom considered in the U.S. as a unique source of health benefits. Yet, that is exactly what research results are telling us about this amazing vegetable/grain. The next time you're in the grocery store, you may find comfort in purchasing and enjoying the flavors of this healthful food.