

A PEACH IS JUST A PEACH, OR IS IT?

A sweet and fragrant peach, ripe enough to drip juice down your chin onto your hands, is one of the joys of summer. A peach is just a peach, or is it? There are hundreds of varieties of peaches. They are grouped into two categories that include freestones and clingstones. Freestones are peaches whose flesh separates easily from the pit and are best for preserving because when cut lengthwise, the pit falls right out; however it can also be eaten fresh. Clingstones, on the other hand, have flesh that “clings” to the pit and are the best for eating fresh and more difficult to preserve. There is no real difference in taste between the two. When buying peaches, there is no way to tell if a peach is a freestone or clingstone just by looking at it. Typically clingstone peaches are found earlier in the season and freestone peaches are found in the middle to the end of the season. If you are at a farm, roadside stand, or farmer’s market, it’s likely that the grower will know which variety they have, so ask. They’ll probably even appreciate that you took the time to expand your peach knowledge!

Picking the perfect peach begins with color. Look for peaches that have turned from green to a reddish blush from being exposed to the sun. The rest of the peach should be a yellowish color. White peaches should have a creamy white background color. The inner flesh of a peach can range in color from white to yellow or orange. One of the biggest indicators for the perfect peach is smell: it should smell how you want it to taste.

Check the fruit for bruises, scratches, or dented areas. Also, the skin should be taut. No wrinkles! A peach should be heavy for its size. Peaches are a fruit that continues to ripen after it is picked, so the firmness of the fruit will depend on how soon you are planning on eating it. Place it in the palm of your hand and give it a gentle squeeze. Never poke it with your finger. Here is what you should do depending on how it feels:

- Rock hard – Put it back! It was probably picked before maturing.
- Tennis ball-like – It’s almost there, will be ripe within the week.
- Real give – Ready to eat now or within a few days.
- Soft – You must eat it now.
- Super soft – It’s overripe, perfect for sorbet or smoothies.

So how should you store them based on their ripeness? If the peaches are ripe but you aren’t ready to eat them, place them in the fridge. You’ll need to frequently check on it. Store not quite ripe peaches on the kitchen counter, on their shoulders, and not touching one another. Place a few firm peaches in a paper bag to ripen faster. Include a very ripe banana in the bag or an apple if you wish to speed up the ripening process.

According to USDA Nutrition Data, peaches store a broad range of nutrients that are vital for the healthy functioning of the body. Peaches are a rich source of potassium, vitamin A, beta-carotene, and vitamin C. They are also a good source of vitamin E, vitamin K, vitamin B1 (thiamin), vitamin B2 (riboflavin), vitamin B3 (niacin), vitamin B-6, and folate. Peaches also offer a rich treasure of minerals such as calcium, magnesium, iron, phosphorus, zinc, and copper. A medium-sized peach contains around 59 calories and 0 cholesterol.

Now that you know all about peaches and more than likely have a basket full, what are you going to do with them? More often than not, peaches are used for their sweetness in desserts. Some of the most popular include your traditional peach cobbler, peach crisp, pound cake, and peach preserves. Some other ways to use your peaches are preparing a salsa or chutney, adding them to a salad, or creating a refreshing peach beverage. You can also make peaches into a marinade for chicken or pork chops.

(<https://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/foods/show/09236>; www.choosemyplate.gov; www.nutrition.gov)