Cultivating Independence

By Toni Ambrogio

As the moving van pulls away and you are left in your new apartment to unpack and get settled, you are left wondering how you are going to pay for the groceries needed to fill the fridge. If you or someone you know has recently moved out of a college dorm and into an apartment, then you know that the budget can be tight and your wallet shallow. The thought of buying food is daunting because until now, either the dining halls have prepared your meals and the cost is included in your tuition, or your parents have had dinner ready each night. When faced with the choices of what to eat and prepare, are you considering frozen meals or fresh and healthy homemade dishes?

Either Way You Win

As a college student there are many reasons to eat healthy and stay fit. The stress of exams, a demanding schedule, and your new place can weigh heavily on your eating habits and routines. Whether you have roommates or are living alone, eating the proper amount of fruits and vegetables is key. The health benefits of eating an adequate amount of fruits and vegetables include heart health, vision health, stomach and intestinal health, and preventative measures against cancer. Are you getting the recommended amount of vegetables for your gender and age group category? A male age 19-30 years should be getting 2 cups/day of fruit and 3 cups/day of vegetables. A female age 19-30 years should be getting 2 cups/day of fruit and 2.5 cups/day of vegetables. Now that you are armed with the knowledge of how much to eat, let’s explore how to get that amount.

Look at the layout of your new place. Is it on the fifth floor or are you renting a house? Where are the windows located? Do you have access to a porch or balcony? You might be thinking what do these questions have to do with increasing your fruit and vegetable consumption, but let’s think further into the possibilities. A windowsill is a great place to grow vegetables. They are usually in the sun for many hours of the day and if it rains, you don’t need to water all of the time. They are also accessible and easy to take care of because of the size and location. Right at arm level, reaching outside of your window to grab a fresh tomato for a breakfast omelet is like a scene out of a movie. Porches and balconies have additional
possibilities. Flower pots filled with fresh fruits and vegetables can provide you with a summer full of fresh food. Don’t forget about herbs that can be grown on a windowsill on the interior of your apartment. If you have a close knit tenant community, growing together and sharing the produce is another option. Splitting up the harvest is a wonderful way to bring together the people you live with to promote healthy eating. Some easy to grow vegetables include tomatoes, cucumbers, and squash. As for fruit, strawberries and sugar baby watermelon are perfect for apartment farmers. Get outside and get planting!

If you feel that gardening doesn’t fit into your schedule or you are tight on space, becoming a part of community supported agriculture group (CSA) might be for you. A CSA accepts money at the beginning of a growing season and a fifteen pound or so assortment of fruits and vegetables are either delivered to your door or are ready for pick up once a week. Fresh and ready to eat, the dishes you can whip up are endless. This hassle free way of obtaining fruits and vegetables is perfect for the first time renter, especially a college student on a tight budget. The UMass Amherst CSA is $325 for a 10-week share. Other local CSA’s are $400-$500 for a 22-week share. That breaks down to only $30 a week, or $4 a day, on fresh fruits and vegetables. Find a CSA near you at localharvest.org. Saving money on gas and traveling to the grocery store keeps your wallet full and you are not only supporting local agriculture, but are also becoming a part of a community that believes in a healthier you.

**Don’t Feed the Flies**

Food shopping independently can be an adventure. The grocery store can be daunting for someone when they are suddenly in charge of making a meal for themselves and possibly others. A few tips can keep the money in your wallet and your carriage full of fruits and vegetables. When planning a trip to the store, plan a menu for that week. Know what you are going to buy and what meals you are going to cook. Plan to have snacks of fruits and vegetables. When you arrive home, portion the ‘snacks’ out so that they last throughout the week. When buying fruit that you are going to eat as is, buy depending on ripeness. For example, buy ripe bananas and slightly green ones. This way you are able to eat the ripe ones over the next few days while the others ripen for later consumption. Pears and apples may
require the same kind of planning. Applying for a grocery store rewards card can also save money in the produce department. Don’t buy food and let it rot - don’t feed the flies!

Frozen vegetables can be just as healthy as fresh vegetables and last quite some time. There is no need to worry about them going bad if you have the freezer space. Vegetables such as frozen peas or a mixed bag of vegetables can be a surprisingly refreshing snack. Aim to have a salad at each dinner. The great part about salads is the many different ways to make them. Look at prices at the store and see what kind of green leaves are cheapest. Aim for dark green veggies such as spinach and spring mix, but iceberg can be mixed in periodically. Be creative and shred carrots on top or add sprouts from your CSA delivery. Top your salad with whatever you like, even fruit. Surprise a guest with an Asian inspired salad with teriyaki chicken and mandarin orange slices.

**Future Farmers**

Don’t be afraid to eat healthy and get your hands dirty while planting your own produce. Community involvement can be in the form of a backyard garden with your neighbors or buying into a CSA. However you chose to eat more fruits and vegetables, don’t let a limited budget or space be a problem for you.