

The Dirty Dozen

By Mary Montresor

The Dirty Dozen! Mention it and most folks think of the WWII flick that follows the mission of twelve army miscreants. But today, for those concerned about the safety of the food supply, this term has taken on a more nefarious meaning.

The Dirty Dozen is a list of the twelve most pesticide-contaminated fruits and vegetables being sold to American consumers today. The following list is based on information provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other government agencies.

The 12 Most Contaminated List includes apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears potatoes, red raspberries, spinach and strawberries. But the news is not all bad, as the list of the 12 Lest Contaminated shows: asparagus, avocados, bananas, broccoli, cauliflower, corn, kiwi, mangos, onions, papaya, pineapples and peas.

A thorough washing will remove some pesticide residue but not all. The lists above have taken washing, and sometimes even peeling, into account. By avoiding the most contaminated foods, a person can reduce exposure to pesticides by a whopping ninety percent (90%). This can be especially important where small children are concerned since some pesticides can accumulate in the body, over time.

Consumers do not have to forgo these healthy and delicious goodies, just seek out sources of produce grown without harmful, chemical pest controls. Luckily, residents of the Eastern Shore have several options, including growing their own. From a small garden plot to fruit trees, the individual gets to control the entire process. But this requires tillable land and time.

Local, certified, organic produce is the best of all worlds. Picked when ripe and fresh when sold, the nutrient values are higher than fruits and vegetables picked early, gassed and left sitting in trucks for a week or two. Plus, the consumer is assured no chemical pesticides are used and the land has been pesticide-free for a minimum of three years. Another plus: the environmental impact is low because the food isn't being shipped across country ... or from Chile.

However, the process of becoming an official organic farm is lengthy and expensive. Many small farmers do not have this certification even though they may use organic practices. So the next best alternative is local produce that is Naturally Grown. This is the category where many of those small farm operations fall. At the very least, this claim should mean no harmful, chemical pesticides were used on the food in question. It makes no claim about previous crops or crops in other, nearby fields.

Be aware that 'should' is the most important part of the explanation. After all, poison ivy, arsenic, pine tar and sulfuric acid are all natural. Happily, the biggest advantage of buying local produce is that the farmers are often right in front of you. So just ask. They will be quick (and happy) to tell you if they do not use chemical pesticides and are usually honest if they do.

Do not assume that because a certain fruit or vegetable failed to make the bad list, it is completely safe. It is just somewhere in the middle. That is why it is a good idea to wash all produce (even organic) before cooking and/or eating as this removes dirt, field debris and anything that may have drifted over from another farm.

Finally, keep in mind that pesticide residue, like manure, rolls downhill. If the apples are contaminated, so is the apple sauce made from them, as well as the juice, pie, jelly or other product. If you can't make your own, processed organic products are available locally, as well. Yes, they will most likely be more expensive than the three-for-a-dollar special and you may have to go a little out of your way to find them. But harsh, chemical pesticide exposure has been linked to all sorts of ills, including cancer. Buying fresh, organic fruits and vegetables and the other products made from them, is definitely cheaper than doctors, chemotherapy or caskets.