

Take Your Pick With Peck Of Sweet, Versatile Pears

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While you may not have received “a partridge in a pear tree” for Christmas, you still can enjoy the sweet taste and versatility of pears year round. Pears are one of the world’s oldest cultivated fruits. They arrived in America with colonial settlers, eventually making their way to the Pacific Northwest. Today, Washington and Oregon lead the nation in pear production.

Over 3,000 known varieties of pears are grown worldwide. The most common U.S. pear varieties include Bartlett, Anjou, Bosc, Comice, Forell, and Seckel. Bartletts come in both yellow and red and are aromatic, very sweet, and juicy. They are excellent for canning and cooking. Red and green Anjou have a sweet taste and abundant juice and maintain their color as they ripen. The Bosc pear is brown, sometimes russeted, and also does not change its color as it ripens. Its dense flesh makes it an excellent variety for cooking and baking. Comice pears are among the sweetest and juiciest and often are very large. They make an elegant dessert pear that tastes great with cheese. The Seckel is a maroon and olive green tiny pear with ultra-sweet flavor. It is an excellent choice for pickling, as a garnish, and for children’s snacks. The Forelle also is a small, sweet, very juicy variety that turns bright yellow with crimson freckling when ripe.

Pears are a good source of Vitamin C and potassium. One medium-sized pear with the skin also provides 6 grams, or 24 percent of the recommended daily value, of fiber. Of this, 41 percent is from pectin, a type of soluble fiber that binds to fatty substances in the digestive tract, promoting their elimination. This seems to help lower blood cholesterol levels and regulate the body’s use of sugars.

Unlike other fruits, pears ripen best off the tree. They are harvested and shipped mature but unripened. To ripen, place them out in a fruit bowl; add apples and bananas to speed the process. For faster ripening, place pears in a paper bag. Be sure to check pears daily so they do not overripen. To check for ripeness, gently press near the stem with your thumb. When it gives to gentle pressure, it is ripe, juicy, and ready to eat. If you wait until the pear is soft around the middle, it probably will be overripe. Keep ripe pears in the refrigerator for up to three to five days to slow further ripening.

Pears are a versatile fruit. In addition to serving them raw in nearly anything, you can bake, poach, sauté, roast, and grill them. They can be used in baked goods and made into preserves, jams, and chutneys. Overripe pears are tasty in smoothies, sauces, or as a thickening agent for soups, stocks, or stews. Since pears and apples are both in the pome family of fruit, pears can be used interchangeably in any recipe calling for apples.

Cut pears, like apples, turn brown when exposed to oxygen. To slow this browning, brush or dip the cut surfaces in a mild solution of water and lemon juice. This will not completely stop the browning so cut pears should be used as quickly as is practical. Lightly poaching pears also will slow the browning and is a good way to prepare pears for use in salads. You also can use natural anti-browning products, which will slow down browning for over a week. For more information on preserving pears, contact your local county Extension Office.

Source: USA Pears, www.usapears.com

Have a question? Contact the University of Florida IFAS - Washington/Holmes Counties Extension office at (850)638-6265, weekdays 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m.

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