

Week Three Newsletter

What Are Specialty Crops?

Specialty crops are fruits, vegetables, herbs, nuts, and other crops grown primarily for direct consumption, rather than large-scale commodity production. They are often locally grown, nutrient-dense, and versatile, making them ideal for home gardens, farmers' markets, and seasonal meals.

In West Virginia, popular specialty crops include apples and peaches, berries such as strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries, tomatoes and peppers, pumpkins and squash, and herbs like basil, mint, and parsley. These crops are not only flavorful but also provide important nutrients, including fiber, vitamins, and minerals, which support overall health. Because they are often seasonal and locally grown, specialty crops can also promote food sustainability, support local farmers, and connect communities to their regional agriculture. Including these crops in your diet encourages a variety of tastes, textures, and colors, which can make healthy eating both enjoyable and nutritionally balanced.

1,500 Miles

produce at grocery stores travel an average of 1,500 miles from farm to store



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Nutritional Value of Specialty Crops

Specialty crops are rich in essential nutrients, antioxidants, and phytonutrients that help support overall health and prevent chronic illnesses. Apples and peaches provide fiber, vitamin C, and antioxidants, supporting heart health and digestion. Berries are particularly high in antioxidants, vitamin C, and manganese, which help reduce inflammation and protect brain function. Tomatoes and peppers contain lycopene, vitamins A and C, which promote cardiovascular health and support healthy skin. Pumpkins and squash are excellent sources of beta-carotene (vitamin A), potassium, and fiber, which help maintain healthy vision, immunity, and digestive function. Fresh herbs such as basil, mint, and parsley are packed with vitamins A, C, and K, along with antioxidants that support overall wellness and add flavor without extra calories.

Eating a variety of these crops, often called “eating a rainbow,” ensures a broad spectrum of nutrients and phytonutrients, and introduces different flavors and textures to make meals more appealing and satisfying.



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Practical Tips & Resources

Incorporating specialty crops into your daily meals can be simple, creative, and delicious. Berries or chopped apples can be added to oatmeal, cereal, yogurt, or smoothies for a nutrient-packed start to the day. Fresh herbs such as parsley, basil, or mint can enhance salads, roasted vegetables, soups, and sauces. Squash and pumpkins can be roasted, mashed, or added to soups and casseroles, offering both flavor and valuable nutrients. Trying new recipes with seasonal, locally grown crops not only enhances nutrition but also supports West Virginia farmers and local food systems, helping the community thrive.

Helpful resources include local nutritionists or dietitians, who can provide guidance on meal planning and maximizing the nutritional benefits of specialty crops. Farmers' markets and community gardens offer access to fresh, seasonal crops while connecting you with local growers. Even small changes, like adding one new crop or recipe each week, can make a meaningful difference in your overall health, increase your intake of essential nutrients, and encourage a lifelong habit of eating a variety of fresh, local foods.

