Nutrition can be found in garden

By Carol C. Giesecke

Some people regard winter as a time to get out the seed catalogs and dream about the wonderful vegetables they are going to plant when spring comes. Others get a thrill out of buying vegetable plants from the Master Gardener Plant sale on the DSU campus in late April.

However you decide to do it, the best part about growing your own vegetables is eating them, and anticipating their great flavor. The USDA MyPyramid recommends eating at least three servings of vegetables a day (1/2 cup raw or cooked vegetable, a medium potato or carrot, or 1 cup leafy salad greens each equal one serving). And they are so good for you.

Although not as quick to produce food for you as most vegetables, there are many berries, too, that are wonderful for health. Blueberries, blackberries, raspberries and strawberries are all good sources of cancer-fighting phytochemicals — antioxidants that can help protect your cells from free radicals. That is an article for another time.

Here are some of the reasons to grow and eat your vegetables:

1. Vegetables are low in calories, so they are great if you are trying to control your weight. They contain very little fat, protein, or carbohydrate — the nutrients that give us food energy, or calories. Vegetables are made mostly of water and some carbohydrate — mostly fiber and a little starch and sometimes a little natural sugar.

2. Potatoes, corn, peas, dried beans and legumes are higher in protein and carbohydrates so they are also higher in calories than other vegetables. The fiber in vegetables helps fill you up and is helpful in lowering risk for disease. Although the mechanisms are still being examined, several research studies have indicated that increased fiber intake can lower insulin resistance and, thus, reduce the likelihood that a person will develop type-2 diabetes.

3. Certain biochemical indicators of heart disease are also reduced with adequate fiber intake.

Vegetables are high in vitamin A (carotene), vitamin C and folate.

3. Vegetables are high in minerals. The amount of certain minerals found in vegetables will depend on the mineral content of the soil. Minerals are needed to regulate your body's processes.

4. Vegetables can help lower your risk for chronic disease. Who eats plenty of vitamin-rich, high-fiber vegetables have lower rates of cancer and heart disease, including high blood pressure, especially when combined with a lower fat diet and a healthy lifestyle (enough exercise, no smoking).

It's important to eat the vegetables, as just taking supplements (vitamins, anti-oxidants) does not show the same positive effect.

Remember to store fresh vegetables in a cool, dry place after harvesting to keep the nutrients. Most vegetables should be refrigerated for use within a week. Folate and vitamin C lose their potency in warm temperatures, or when cooked too long in too much water. If you have a bumper crop, share with family and friends and/or call Delaware Cooperative Extension about ways to preserve the extra vegetables.

Editor's note: Dr. Carol C. Giesecke is a registered dietician and the state specialist for Nutrition, Consumer Economics and Health for Delaware State University Cooperative Extension. For more information on this and other nutrition-related issues, contact Dr. Giesecke at 302 857-6439, or cgiecke@desu.edu.