

Is there a way to wash the pesticides off fruits and vegetables before we eat them?

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Dear EarthTalk: Is there a way to wash the pesticides off fruits and vegetables before we eat them? -- Michelle, Chalmette, LA

EARTH TALK From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

Many fruits and vegetables sold in the United States today are treated with pesticides, and residues of these potentially harmful chemicals often remain on their surfaces. Rinsing all produce thoroughly before eating is always a good idea, but many pesticides, fungicides and other agricultural chemicals are trapped under a wax coating that was added to resist water and prolong shelf life. As such, rinsing produce with just plain water is not enough to do the job. Several companies have developed products that can help.

Organiclean contains extracts from coconut, sugar cane, sugar maple, bilberry, orange and lemon, is completely biodegradable, organic, and is a registered kosher product. The manufacturer claims that the product is ideal for hard-to-clean produce like strawberries, raspberries, spinach, lettuce and broccoli. It comes in an 8-ounce plastic spray bottle.

Another option is Veggie-Wash, from Citrus Magic. Made of natural vegetable-based ingredients from citrus fruit, corn and coconut, and containing no preservatives, Veggie-Wash comes in a 16-ounce spray bottle as well as 32-ounce and gallon refills. Meanwhile, Fit Fruit & Vegetable Wash spray is made from citric acid and grapefruit oil, and claims to remove 98 percent more pesticides, waxes and other contaminants versus washing with water alone. Fit comes in 12-ounce spray bottles and 32-ounce refills.

For those inclined to more homespun solutions, various combinations of common pantry items work well, too. One recipe calls for soaking produce for five minutes in a 50/50 solution of white vinegar and water, while another calls for spraying fruits and vegetables with a combination of one tablespoon of lemon juice, two tablespoons of baking soda and one cup of water. Meanwhile, Consumer Reports says that a diluted wash of dish detergent followed by a tap water rinse eliminates pesticide residues on most fruits and vegetables. After any such treatments, all produce should be rinsed thoroughly in plain water prior to eating or cooking.

Some analysts think that washing produce is not needed given strict Food and Drug

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Administration regulations about pesticide residues. "In the U.S., there's very little produce with pesticide residues anywhere near the allowed tolerance levels," says Elizabeth Andress, a food safety specialist with the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety. "If you use a produce wash, you may be reducing the levels of pesticide residues," she says, "but the levels were nowhere near harmful to begin with."

Nonetheless, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says that the only way to ensure avoidance of pesticide residues completely is to buy certified organic produce only. The majority of supermarkets in the U.S. stock pesticide-free organic produce for those willing to spend a few more pennies per item. Consumers should note, however, that even organic produce should be washed before eaten, even if just to remove the impurities caused by human handling.

CONTACTS: Organiclean, (888) 834-9274, www.organiclean.com; Veggie-Wash, (800) 451-7096, www.citrusmagic.com; Fit Fruit & Vegetable Wash, (800) FIT-WASH, www.FitWash.com; EPA Booklet, Pesticides and Food: What You and Your Family Need to Know, www.epa.gov/pesticides/food.

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