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Potatoes and Tomatoes Account for Over Half of U.S. Vegetable Availability

by **Jeanine Bentley**



When consumers are advised in the produce aisle that “More Matters,” they are not just being encouraged to eat a greater quantity of fruits and vegetables, but more variety as well. The nutrient content of specific fruits and vegetables varies; dark greens, such as spinach or kale, are especially rich in vitamin A and folate, while legumes (dry beans and peas, kidney beans, split peas, and lentils) are good sources of protein and fiber. By consuming a variety of fruits and vegetables over the day or week, the body gets the nutrients needed for

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good health.

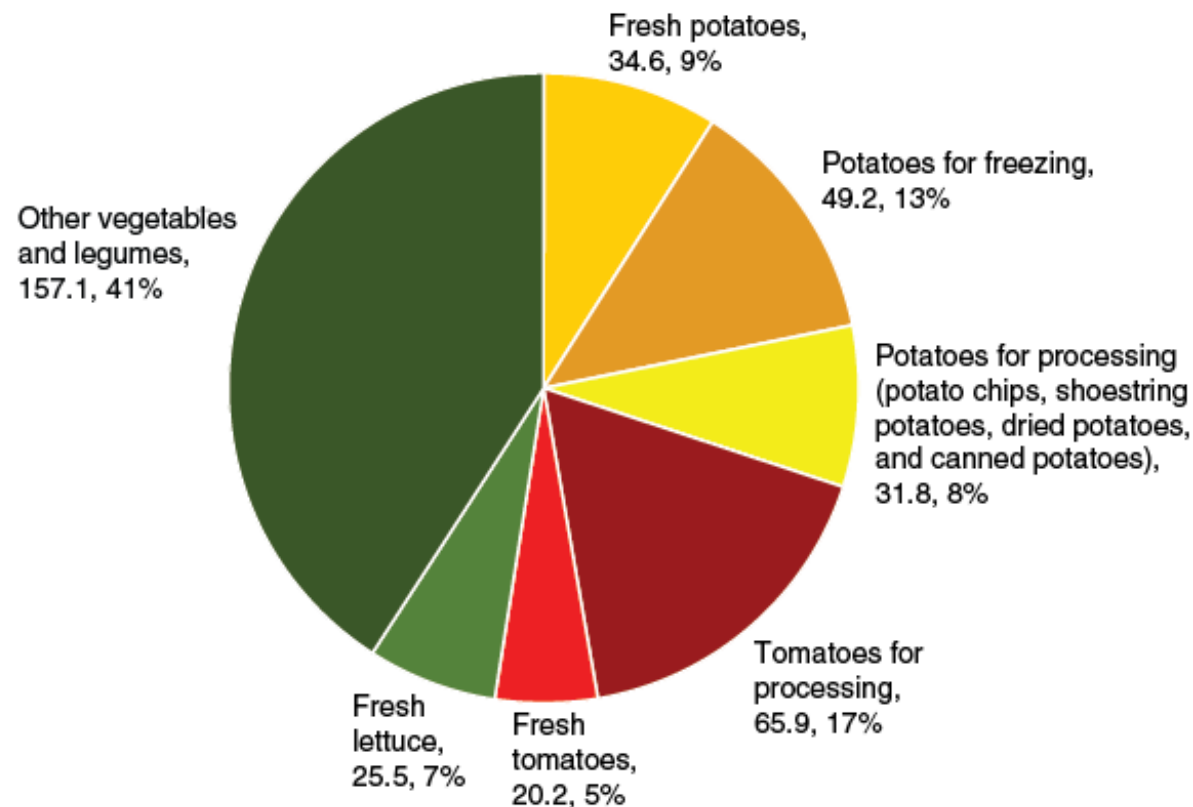
Even though vegetable consumption is more diverse than it was 40 years ago, many Americans keep coming back to the same few favorites. Restricting one's diet to a limited set of vegetables precludes the desired variety that would supply more diverse, healthful nutrients. According to ERS's Food Availability data, just three vegetables—white potatoes, tomatoes, and lettuce—accounted for 59 percent of the vegetables and legumes that were available for consumption in 2013. The Food Availability Data System includes annual national and per capita supplies available for domestic consumption of over 40 vegetables and legumes. ERS calculates these supplies by looking at production, inventories, imports, and exports.

In 2013, 115.6 pounds per person of white potatoes were available for Americans to eat, two-thirds of which were used for French fries, potato chips, and other frozen or processed potato products. White potatoes accounted for 30 percent of the 384.4 pounds per person of vegetables and legumes available in 2013. Tomatoes had a 22-percent share of vegetable availability, with 20.2 pounds per person of fresh tomatoes and 65.9 pounds per person of tomatoes processed in a variety of ways: canned tomatoes, tomato sauces, or as an ingredient in processed stews, soups, and other items for foodservice establishments or supermarket shelves. Fresh lettuce (head lettuce, romaine, and leaf lettuce) rounded out the top 3 vegetables at 25.5 pounds per person, or 7 percent of total vegetable availability, in 2013.

In 1970, white potatoes, tomatoes, and lettuce had a larger combined share; they accounted for 67 percent of the 327.8 pounds of vegetables and legumes available that year. Their larger 1970 share was due to higher fresh white potato availability. Fresh white potato availability was 61.8 pounds per person in 1970, compared to 34.6 pounds in 2013. Availability of processed tomatoes and fresh lettuce were both 3 pounds per person higher in 2013 than in 1970, while fresh tomato availability grew by 8 pounds—from 12.2 pounds per person in 1970 to 20.2 pounds in 2013.

Potatoes, tomatoes, and lettuce account for 59 percent of vegetable availability

Pounds per capita,
Percent of vegetable and legume availability, 2013



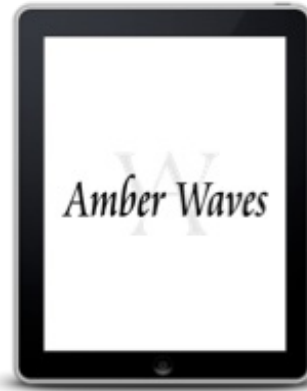
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Food Availability Data.

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Food Availability (Per Capita) Data System, by Jeanine Bentley, USDA, Economic Research Service, August 2015

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