About – Peaches have been around for thousands of years. Popular consensus places the origin of the peach in China. From there, cultivation spread across Persia and the Mediterranean to southern Europe. In the 18th century, the Spanish brought the peach to Mexico and, with the help of French and English colonists, the peach found its way to the eastern United States. In the 18th century, Spanish missionaries brought the peach to California. The peach grew in popularity and planting proliferated to meet the ever-increasing demand of the growing population in California.

While peaches and nectarines are grown in several states, it is California that leads the nation in production supplying approximately 60% of the peaches and over 90% of the nectarines. Other important peach producing states are Washington, South Carolina, New Jersey, Michigan and Georgia.

Nectarines are not a plum/peach cross as some people may think. They are a genetic variation of a peach separated by only one gene. In a nectarine the gene that causes fuzzy skin is recessive, thus, the “smooth-skinned cousin” to the peach.

Summer peaches and nectarines are available from California and other areas of the country from about the middle of May until October. There are over 200 varieties of peaches and over 175 varieties of nectarines that are commercially grown in California alone. Each variety matures at different times with the harvest of any one variety lasting around ten days. That means that the varieties available at the supermarket will change continually throughout the season. A bit confusing, but actually we can break that down into six primary categories of fruit as follows:

Yellow Flesh Peaches and Nectarines: These are the traditional peaches or nectarines that are available all summer long. They have a red blush over a yellow background. This fruit needs to be fully ripened to be eaten.

White Flesh Peaches and Nectarines: As the name implies the flesh is white as is the background color of the skin. The blush will vary from pink to red. They tend to ripen more quickly than their yellow flesh counterparts and are excellent eating - even when not fully ripe. They are available throughout the summer.

Sub-acid Peaches and Nectarines: These varieties of peaches and nectarines share one common characteristic. The acid level of the fruit is reduced, thus giving the fruit a sweeter flavor profile - even when they are not fully ripe. Most white flesh peaches and nectarine are “sub-acid” and several yellow flesh varieties are also available.

There is also the issue of clingstone or freestone varieties - freestone meaning the flesh separates easily from the pit. For the most part, today's varieties of peaches are freestone; however, freestone varieties of nectarines are only available in June and July.

A discussion of peaches would not be complete without mentioning the Saturn peach. Also known as donut peaches or saucer peaches these unique pieces for fruit are flattened and have a slight depression on the top and bottom giving them a “donut-like” profile. They have white flesh, creamy yellow skin with a red blush and intensely sweet flavor. They are available throughout the summer.

Selection – When selecting peaches and nectarines, one should look at the background color of the fruit. A yellow background (or creamy white on white flesh varieties) means the fruit has reached maturity and will ripen properly. The amount of red blush does not indicate ripeness or quality; it is merely an attribute of each individual variety. Aroma is also important and if the fruit is at room temperature, it should display its characteristic aroma. Be sure the fruit is free of major blemishes or bruises and handle them very carefully. As peaches and nectarines ripen they will yield to gentle palm pressure.

Storage – For best ripening results store unripe or firm peaches and nectarines at room temperature. Do not put them on a window sill in direct sunlight as the heat will be too intense and will damage the fruit. To speed up the ripening process, carefully place the fruit in a single layer inside a paper bag with a closed top for a day or two making sure to check them often for ripeness. If you refigerate unripe fruit between 36 and 49 degrees, you will not only inhibit the ripening process but you also run the risk of causing internal breakdown resulting in fruit that is dry, flavorless and mealy. Once the fruit is soft and ripe, it can safely be refrigerated for up to a week.

Preparation and Uses – Preparation of peaches and nectarines couldn’t be simpler. Just rinse them thoroughly under cold water and enjoy. Eating a juicy ripe peach or nectarine out of hand is always a great experience. Sliced on cereal, in a fresh fruit salad or salsa, in smoothies, baked in a cobbler, cake or pastry, and made into jams or preserves are some of the other ways to enjoy the delicious flavor of peaches and nectarines.

Nutrition – Peaches and nectarines contain significant amounts of vitamin C along with vitamin A and potassium. Both of these fruits are a good source of healthy carbohydrates and dietary fiber. Peaches and nectarines also contain antioxidants and phytonutrients that are important in helping to reduce the risk of cancer and heart disease.