

Activity: Food/Cooking Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Taste & Spit Vegetables

Text by Lesley Fleming, HTR

Photo by My Toddler Life, L. Fleming & O. Bridge



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: As a sensory experience rooted in nutrition, participants will taste vegetables, some common, others less common.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Expand understanding of self-regulation, sensory inputs & personal responses to inputs

Physical: Practice strategies for reducing blood pressure, high blood sugar

Psychological/Emotional: Recognize over-reactions as part of self-regulation & appropriate behavior

Sensory: Demonstrate decreased gustatory (taste) defensiveness; develop automatic & appropriate responses to vegetable flavors that are both pleasant & unpleasant

Social: Understand societal rules for appropriate behavior using humor to reinforce rules

Materials

Assorted vegetables - common & uncommon (carrots, zucchini, onions, gobo, mizuna, Litchi tomato)
Knife(s), cutting board
plates, wipes, napkins
Garbage cups & cans

Photo below: Shosaku Gobo



STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials & set up activity area.
2. Facilitator begins session by introducing the fun session Taste & Spit Vegetables.
3. Facilitator lays out the colorful vegetables like setting a table, so that participants can take time to see the variety, colors, shapes & textures of whole vegetables as a visual sensory prompt for what is to follow.
4. The “rules” of the taste & spit session are covered. Each vegetable is to be tasted, with participants thinking about their preferences, likes & dislikes of the vegetables’ flavors, smells & textures. Discuss etiquette rules & society’s rules for appropriate behavior. In this session only, participants are allowed to discreetly spit out flavors they do not like (into specified trash cups at their spot).
5. Participants taste each vegetable with the understanding that ones with flavors they dislike can be discarded/spit out. One option – have cooked vegetables available & included as part of the session.
6. Facilitator presents nutrition, horticulture & behavior facts during the session, discussing color of vegetables as indicators of nutrient dense food; importance of eating; how good nutrition can positively impact health issues & medical conditions related to poor nutrition; flavors including umami; & self-regulation responses to taste.
7. All participants help to clean up activity area.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Focusing on sensory stimulation using taste, smell, touch and hearing, introduce common and less common vegetables, allowing participants to have fun spitting out flavors they don't like. Activity can include sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami flavors, the primary taste categories. Most populations will benefit from a nutrition-focused hands-on tasting and where humor of (discreetly) spitting out less pleasant tastes is allowed. Integrating themes of self-regulation, sensory inputs and feelings/responses that are instinctive but need to be managed (practicing appropriate responses which may not be automatic even when flavors are unpleasant), practicing to not over-react and recognizing and behaving appropriately in society (school, restaurants, food trucks, family meals) can be reinforced using a humorous approach.

Taste and spit activity can have direct relevancy for populations with sensory processing and self-regulation challenges, gustatory disinterest due to cancer, COVID-19 or medication side effects, as well as populations where behavior re-direct is a therapeutic goal – children, youth (picky eaters), people with eating disorders, and seniors with diminished food intake. Populations with physical health challenges like high blood sugar, high cholesterol and high blood pressure can have fun while expanding their knowledge and efforts to improve their health. People with food insecurity or incarcerated populations may have limited access to food particularly nutrient-dense vegetables. Session may provide factual information and experience tasting healthy options.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Not appropriate for individuals or populations who may have communicable diseases transmitted through saliva, or who have swallowing, allergies or contraindications with medication. Facilitator may choose to cut up vegetables to restrict use of knives. Safe food handling protocols should be in place – vegetables passed around should not be the same ones eaten.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Vegetables that are less common can be grown from seed and transplants in home, community and facility gardens. “Edible greens include White Russian kale (*B. napus*) with tender leaves at maturity, or Mizuna (*B. rapa*), a quick grower with slightly frilly leaves. Tomatillos like ‘Cossack Pineapple’ ground cherry (*Physalis pruinosa*) tastes like a cross between pineapple/blackberry/tomato in papery husks. Amarylla tomatillo, originally from Poland, matures in July, ahead of other varieties. Litchi tomato (*Solanum sisymbriifolium*), a 4 ft. thorny specimen is sweet and tart and fruits in early August. Root crops with unusual characteristics include red heart shaped Rossa di Milano onion, and Shosaku Gobo, a Japanese wild burdock biennial with long slender roots” (Fleming, 2021).



Rossi di Milano onion



Amarylla tomatillo



Graffiti eggplant

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.