

Ask an Expert: Tips for the Perfect Picnic



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Whether you're throwing together a quick picnic or planning an outing in advance, we've got some great tips to make your summer picnics a success.

Picnic Season is Here

The summer season brings plenty of opportunity for fun, and picnics are a perfect way to get out and enjoy the outdoors without going too far or spending a lot of money. Picnicking can fit almost any budget and be as simple or elaborate as you want it to be. Some of the best picnics happen on the spur of the moment and don't need a lot of planning. No picnic basket? No problem. Anything that will hold your supplies will do.

Pack Your Picnic with Food Safety in Mind

If you will be gone longer than 2 hours from departure to eating, plan to pack a cooler. After 2 hours at room temperature (1 hour if temperatures are around 90 F), harmful bacteria that cause food poisoning rapidly multiply. USDA guidelines say cold foods should be kept as close to 40 F as possible and hot food should be kept above 140 F.

Cooler Tips

If you are planning to make picnics a mainstay of your summer activity, consider investing in a cooler-on-wheels for portability. To help keep foods cold, chill them in the refrigerator before packing and keep them in the cooler until serving time.

Get double duty from your cooler space. Fill empty drink bottles half full of water or juice and freeze. The frozen

drinks will act as ice packs to keep the picnic cool in transit. At your destination, top off the bottles with water or a drink to sip through your meal.

Location, Location, Location

When planning your picnic food items, consider where you are going. Even if it's just to the park, it will help you prepare by considering the setting. Avoid anything that gets drippy, limp or wimpy in warm weather. Gelatin salad is a perfect example of what not to take, and even tossed salads will wilt if left in the sun or warm weather very long.

Menu Tips

For a no-fuss menu, have a fix-your-own sandwich bar. Fill plastic containers with pre-sliced sandwich fixings, such as lettuce, tomatoes, cheeses, meats, bell peppers, olives, mushrooms, onions and spinach. Set out hearty breads, crusty rolls or tortilla wraps and condiments. To add a gourmet touch, splurge on a couple of interesting spreads, such as pesto, tapenade or flavored soft cheese. Everyone can build a custom sandwich for a fraction of what you'd pay at the deli.

Sometimes the fun of a summer picnic is the spontaneity, and having fruits and vegetables on hand makes packing a breeze. Simple finger food, like carrots, celery, sliced jicama and sliced bell peppers are a great cool, crispy addition to any picnic plate and a great way to bring in vegetables. Add a vegetable dip and you have a quick and easy side dish.

If you plan to picnic frequently this summer, make a standard packing list for spur-of-the-moment jaunts, and keep your pantry stocked with food that is suitable for a picnic.

Basic Picnic Supply List

- Napkins, plates, cups, dinnerware
- Garbage bags
- Plastic bags (like Ziploc)
- Serving utensils and cutting knives
- Can opener
- Cutting mat or cutting board
- Salt and pepper, packets of condiments
- Blanket to sit on
- Hand sanitizer, wet wipes or a wet washcloth in a plastic bag
- Paper towels
- Insect repellent
- Extra water
- Balls, games, Frisbees, etc.

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