Slugs From Plant to Food

Sucrose is a naturally occurring sugar (carbohydrate) in fruits and vegetables. All plants produce sucrose by photosynthesis, a natural process that turns sunlight into vital energy. Just as they play an essential role in the growth and life of plants, sucrose and other sugars are important sources of energy in our diet.

It is no coincidence that “sweet” is the first taste perceived by a newborn baby. The pleasure we experience in eating sweet-tasting foods is innate. Moreover, many scientists believe that our sense of sweetness helped our ancestors distinguish safe and energy producing foods from harmful foods since most toxic or spoiled foods tend to be bitter-tasting.

Although all fruits and vegetables contain sucrose in various amounts, on a commercial level the most practical sources of sucrose are sugar cane and sugar beet. The sugar-rich juice they contain is extracted and purified using two slightly different processes.

Sugar From Plant to Food

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NATURE’S WAY

Did you know that sugar beet and sugar cane are recycled after the sugar is extracted? Sugar cane residue, known as bagasse, is often used as fuel by the sugar mill itself. In fact, some mills generate their own electricity from bagasse and even supply power to neighbouring towns. Sugar beet pulp is used mostly in animal feed. The sugar beet leaves and tops may also be used as local livestock feed.

NUTRITION AND FOOD FOCUS

A nutrient for energy, and for the pleasure of eating well

Sugar not only help foods taste sweet, but also suppresses unpleasant bitter and sour tastes. When heated, sugar caramelizes, which enhances other flavours and also produces a golden brown color we enjoy in baked goods, such as the crust of bread.

Sugar contributes to the texture of foods in many ways. Sugar binds to water, keeping foods soft and moist. During baking, sugar crystallizes, enhancing the crispness of baked foods (e.g., ginger snap cookies). In frozen foods, such as ice cream, sugar helps lower the freezing point and ensures the development of fine crystals, which results in a smooth, soft product.

Finally, sugar helps to preserve foods. Sugar binds water, making it unavailable for microorganisms to grow. By reducing the water available for microorganisms, fewer preservatives are needed in products containing sugar compared to those without sugar.

MINI-QUIZ

Check out your “sugar knowledge” by identifying the following statements as either true or false (check the box below for correct answers).

1. All plants produce sucrose by photosynthesis.
2. Granulated sugar is bleached to make it white.
3. Sugar cane is grown and harvested in the Prairies.
4. Molasses is a by-product of sugar refining.
5. A tsp of honey, maple syrup, or table sugar each have the same number of calories.
6. The sugar produced from sugar cane and sugar beet is different.
7. There are 3 cane sugar refineries in Canada.


This fact sheet, developed with the collaboration of Registered Dietitians and Nutrition Researchers, is published by the Canadian Sugar Institute. For additional copies of this resource, please contact:

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