PLU Stickers: 6 Things You Might Not Know About Those Annoying Stickers on Your Apples

We don’t really think about PLU stickers outside of the checkout line at the grocery store and the annoyance of peeling them off fruits and vegetables before we eat them. Even so, PLU stickers have managed to inspire confusion, prevent compost from being all it can be, and stay on top of the produce labeling game in spite of other, much more environmentally friendly options. There may be some things about these little labels that you haven’t thought of yet.

They Are Not Edible

The FDA has categorized both the stickers and the adhesive they use as safe to ingest. That categorization has led several articles saying it’s fine if you get a bite of sticker when you eat your food. But eating the stickers is like eating plastic wrap. In addition, the glues holding the stickers to the fruit are made of turpentine, petroleum, and urea-formaldehyde resins. The stickers won’t kill you if you eat them, but they definitely aren’t good for you.

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Stop Looking for 8s

For a while, there were rumors going around that PLU codes that began with an 8 indicated that the item labeled was a GMO. It turns out that there is a kernel of truth to that rumor…but that particular hack is not helpful for consumers.

> *Though the ‘8’ prefix (83000-84999) was once reserved for GMO produce items, the prefix was never used at retail.”*
>
> *Independent Federation for Produce Standards*

While this news is disappointing for those of us who were hoping to for an easy way to avoid GMOs, it make sense that most businesses wouldn’t make it that easy.

Composting Facilities Hate Them

PLU stickers are usually made of vinyl or another plastic film. These plastics are not biodegradable, and they’re not affected by the heat of compost piles. The small size of the stickers also enables them to escape most shredders and sifters, allowing the stickers to make it into finished compost. Sometimes facilities will have to purchase specialized equipment or even pay a picker to go through and find PLU stickers. Often times composting facilities will turn away massive loads of stickered, spoiled produce due to contamination issues.

PLU Stickers Are Voluntary

The federal government does not require PLU stickers. PLU sticker usage is driven by businesses. If it was cheaper or more effective to use another, more sustainable labeling system, PLU stickers would likely disappear quickly.

> *No, the PLU system is voluntary and based on business needs. It is not regulated by a governmental agency. Specifically, no regulatory body requires a PLU sticker on loose produce. Labeling produce with PLU codes are typically required by the retail industry to assist with point-of-sale (POS) identification.”*
>
> *Independent Federation for Produce Standards*

Lasers!

One solution to the problems of produce stickers involves lasering the label into the skin of produce. Laser labeling machines require more upfront investment than purchasing stickers, but once that initial investment is met, the process is actually cheaper. Dutch produce supplier and Swedish supermarket ICA ran a joint program that used laser technology to label avocados and sweet potatoes.

> *The calculations are that it costs the same, but sustainability for our consumers and ourselves is the biggest gain. I hope it will take off with more products and also non-organic. I can only imagine what a bigger retailer would be able to save. I really hope it spreads."*
>
> *Peter Hagg, ICA business unit manager*

There is still work to be done on laser labels, as labels etched on citrus fruit are unreadable due to citrus peels' regenerative qualities.

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Wash it Off

If you've ever wanted stickers to wash away, as opposed to cling forever, check out FruitWash. FruitWash is a solution posed by New York City engineer Scott Amron, and it consists of a label sticker that turns into an organic produce wash when washed in water.

Biodegradable and Compostable Options

In considering the issue of PLU stickers, there is the inevitable question…why not make these stickers biodegradable

or compostable? Great news! These options already exist. Sinclair International, the largest fruit sticker company in the world offers a compostable option. Other companies also offer eco-friendly stickers. Businesses could eliminate massive quantities of food waste by switching to a biodegradable option, but they haven't because compostable stickers are more expensive for them.

There are overall cheaper and more environmentally friendly fruit-labeling options than the one we are currently choosing. But these options require a larger initial investment, cost more money overall, or would necessitate the work of adapting a system that's already in place. As a consumer, I find myself searching for stickerless options and fighting to peel off stickers before I put them in the compost bin while I wait for business to come to the realization that there are better ways to identify fruit.

Sources:

- *The Truth about Fruit Stickers* – Dirt Mag
- *How Produce Stickers Contribute to Climate Change* – CBC
- *Those Little Produce Stickers? They're a Big Waste Problem* – Modern Farmer