

Local Food: Does It Matter What We Eat?

07/11 | Prepared by Blake Lanford, Extension Agent | *Community and Economic Development*

Everybody eats. Some of us prefer hamburgers. Some like veggies. But what you eat is only the beginning. Here's something else to ask yourself: Does it matter where your food comes from? Is there any difference between tomatoes grown locally vs. those that arrive on a truck from 1,500 miles away? What does chemical ripening of fruits and vegetables mean? Is that safe? Can what you eat really impact the environment ... positively or negatively?

Why Local Food?

Have you been hearing the recent news reports on local foods? It seems more and more people are planting gardens or making a point to buy their food from a farmer in their local community. Why do you suppose that is? Do you think locally grown food is healthier, fresher, cleaner, or better tasting? There's certainly a lot to consider!

Let's begin with the news reports. Along with the local foods interests, other stories detail all kinds of food recalls. It seems that every month you hear about another batch of contaminated food along with warnings about eating it. Killer peanut butter. Killer spinach. Killer dog food. What's next? Is some contaminated item already in your freezer? Help!

Reasons to Buy Locally Grown Foods

1. Freshness. Local fruits and vegetables are usually harvested and sold more quickly so they do not contain the preservatives that are added to products shipped long distances and placed in storage.
2. Taste. Produce that is ripened on the vine has better texture and flavor than produce harvested unripe, then treated with chemicals and ripened during shipping.
3. Nutrition. Nutritional value declines — often drastically — as time passes after harvesting.
4. Improving the local economy. When you buy homegrown food, you circulate your food dollars inside the local area.
5. Strengthening producer/consumer relations. When purchasing food locally, consumers can ask how the product was grown and processed, what chemicals (if any) were used, and any other questions they may have. People tend to trust individuals they know, and they become repeat buyers.

What About The Environment?

On average, most food travels over 1,500 miles before it reaches our plates. These are called food miles. That distance obviously has a negative impact on the environment. Transportation costs (by truck, rail, or air) must be added to the price each of us pays. The transporting vehicle burns fossil fuels that pollute the environment. Often, packaging is heavier to protect contents traveling great distances. And preservatives may be applied to maintain freshness. All of these things have a negative impact on the environment.

Next, economies of scale must be considered. What does that mean? Well, to give an example, one large truck that carries 50,000 pounds of tomatoes may cause less pollution than 50 smaller trucks carrying 1,000 pounds each. However, the packaging, preservatives, and lack of freshness still remain as negatives. And don't forget the money. Would you rather help create and maintain food-related jobs in your local community or send your dollars out of state?

To really understand what's most important about the food we eat, we need to understand the entire food system.

What Is A Food System?

A food system is the often-complex network of food producers (farmers), food consumers (eaters), and the businesses that link them together. The five key links of this food chain are (1) production, (2) distribution, (3) processing, (4) consumption, and (5) waste recovery.

A local food system does more than just connect growers, businesses, and consumers in a region. It considers the bigger issues of health and nutrition, economic development, environmental sustainability, and overall community strength. Together, these elements greatly impact how people in a community live and interact. Increasingly, these elements are governed by food policies.



What Is Food Policy?

A food policy consists of the rules and regulations that govern how food is produced and distributed. These are generally run by a Food Policy Council, whose primary goal is to cultivate a stronger and more sustainable local food system in order to bring benefits to residents of a region. Some of these include:

Food access: Many communities are considered “food deserts” where it’s difficult for residents to find foods needed to support a healthy diet. The supermarkets have left the neighborhoods and the only place to buy food is at a convenience store. Locally based food systems can help connect local growers and urban residents, adding to the availability of healthy foods.

Health and nutrition: A local food policy can help increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables. This can help balance the tendency in our society to eat highly processed “fast foods” that cause heart disease, diabetes, and other diet-related illnesses. Also, a food policy can encourage improved institutional nutrition standards at schools, hospitals, businesses, etc.

Community development: Farmers’ markets, quick-stop fresh-food centers, community and market gardens, and other outlets for local food can improve health in neighborhoods while creating spaces for people to gather, socialize, learn, and enjoy life as a community.

Economic development: There are many new business opportunities in food production, distribution, processing, and restaurant or food service operations.

Urban agriculture and gardening: Many cities have seen population loss from downtown and close-in neighborhoods in recent years. Vacant lots provide opportunities for green space to support community gardens, market gardens, or native plant preserves. These increase the supply of healthy foods.

Environmental sustainability: Since most food travels so far, increasing the use of local food can reduce reliance on fossil fuels and related carbon emissions.

Urban-rural partnerships: Local food systems can help connect urban and rural populations by encouraging social interaction and business partnerships. This helps build stronger regional economies.

The dynamics of local food systems are complex and difficult to influence on an individual basis. However there are a numbers of things that can be done to collectively impact the access to local foods within a community. Consider

Home: Things You Can Do

Meal Planning: Incorporate at least 2 locally grown or produced foods into your family meals each week for one month. (Next month, try for three or four!)

Family Food Assessment: Survey your family's eating habits. Make a list of the types of foods your family eats. Think about whether some of these foods can be purchased from local growers or producers. Discuss this during a meal with your family. What do they think?

Family Food Survey: Review your family's food shopping habits.

1. Make a list of the stores where your family usually buys their food.
2. Are the stores owned locally or are they regional/ national chains?
3. Why does your family choose to shop there?
4. Does your family ever shop at farmers' markets? If not, what would make them stop and shop there?
5. Are you concerned with food safety? List 4 things that might cause concerns.

Start a compost bin in your kitchen. Keep it clean and fresh by emptying it every few days into a compost pile outside. Go online and check out <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic>. Search composting.

Plan and plant a small garden this spring. If space is an issue, try raised beds, patio or windowsill pots.

Do a report for your class or 4H club meeting on what you've discovered under the "Food at Your House" topic.

School: Things You Can Do

Ask your school cafeteria director if they serve any local foods. Dig deep. Ask why or why not?

Do a quick Internet search on "local food in schools" and write a short essay describing your findings. Could your school participate? What foods would be easy to begin with?

Organize a campaign to ask your school to offer fruit that is grown locally. Include vending machines!

Share "Related Resources" (found on the next page), like "Farm to School" with your school principal.

Community: You Can Do

Start where you shop! Ask your supermarket produce manager if they purchase foods that are grown or produced locally. Dig deep. Ask for their definition of "local." Do they consider it within a 50-mile radius? Or is it 250 miles? Not all "local" labels are equal.

Investigate restaurants in your town that serve locally grown or produced foods. The next time your family eats out, ask to go to one of them. (Remember to tell the restaurant why you chose them!)

Investigate farmers' markets in your area. How many are there? What days/hours do they operate? What types of foods and products do they sell?

CSA Sign-Up: Go online and search for any Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) or Food Co-Op operating in your area. Investigate the pricing structure. Compare it to supermarket expenses.

Resources

<http://www.farmtoschool.org/>— Farm to School connects schools (K–12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias; improving student nutrition; providing agriculture, health, and nutrition education opportunities; and supporting local and regional farmers.

<http://www.LocalHarvest.org/>— Local Harvest is a not-for-profit web site designed to help consumers find fresh locally grown foods in neighborhoods throughout the United States, including Farmers' Markets, CSAs, U-Picks, and more.

<http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/>— The Center for Food Safety is a public interest and environmental advocacy organization that works to address the impacts of our food production system on human health, animal welfare, and the environment.

<http://www.sare.org/>— The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is a U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded initiative that sponsors competitive grants for sustainable agriculture research and education in a regional process nationwide.

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