



Local and Your Co-op

These days, it's hard *not* to hear about shopping local, buying local, and eating local. While the concept has become trendy and, yes, is a potent marketing buzzword, it's much more than a fad. Relocalizing our systems – from our food system to our economy and more in between – has incredible potential to rebuild community wealth, increase people's ability to influence processes and decisions that affect them, improve sustainability and shrink our environmental impact, and to deliver a whole host of other benefits. Healthful eating, conscientious stewardship of the planet, and community strength are important issues that help shape and direct the trend toward local food.

Sounds great, right? Local isn't always so simple, though. Local options may not be available in your area. Because our economic, regulatory, and infrastructure systems favor megafarms, local options can be more expensive (though they are produced with fewer hidden costs, like pollution and local wealth extraction). And *how* local does local need to be – 500 miles? 100 miles? Grown locally? Processed or distributed locally?

The best way to go local is as much as you can, when you can, and to support organizations and public policies that promote localism.

When you choose to eat local foods, you:

1. Minimize food miles

Food miles are the distance that food travels before it reaches store shelves. In North America, most fresh food is transported 1,000 to 1,500 miles before being sold—from farm to distribution centers across the country, then back to the grocery shelves. So while a neighboring agribusiness may grow broccoli, on average it will travel 1,300 miles to get to your local store. And this can take days, or even weeks. A local farmer, on the

other hand, can often get your broccoli to you or your local food cooperative the same day it's harvested.

Besides diminishing freshness, food miles translate into massive amounts of fossil fuel burned and carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide and other pollutants released, which contribute to acid rain, pollution and climate change. Additional energy is needed to refrigerate foods that might spoil over time in transport, and to produce paper and plastic packaging materials for these products. Local food purchases reduce the pollution involved with the disposal of these materials, too. Reducing food miles is a powerful way to positively impact the environment.

2. Support local farmers and economies

Buying local food supports local economies, protects small farms, and encourages responsible land development.

When you buy commercial foods produced by large-scale agribusiness, most of the money for the food goes to marketers, intermediary brokers, processors, and suppliers. In fact, on average, only 3.5 cents of each food dollar goes to the farmer. The closer you buy to the farmer, the more of your food dollar the farmer receives.

In addition to putting more money into the hands of the farmers who grow your food, eating locally strengthens small family farms, which have been on the decline for decades. According to the USDA, there were almost 5.5 million farms in the US in 1950, but according to the 2003 Census, that number has shrunk to just over 2 million. Again according to the USDA, while the vast majority of farms are small farms – 98% of them! – their share of the market is only about 27%. And the [American Farmland Trust](#) reports that the US loses more than a million acres of farmland annually, thanks to urban and suburban sprawl and the growth in commercial agribusiness.

Buying local helps enable local farmers to maintain the land they respect and work to preserve, and small farms are more likely to participate in land stewardship programs and be less dependent on chemical inputs than large agribusiness. Small farmers are more likely to reinvest in their communities, too, which results in a cycle of enhanced well-being; and locally-owned businesses in general contribute more to the local economy, keeping more money circulating right here in our communities.

3. *Eat better food*

As a general rule, local food is fresher, riper, better-tasting, and of overall better quality than commercially produced food shipped thousands of miles. It's produced for flavor and nutrition, not so it can withstand travel and industrial equipment. It doesn't require preservatives and/or irradiation, and it doesn't lose nutritive value in transport. And because it's locally distributed, most local farm-produced food involves minimal processing.

Because local farmers don't need to contend with high-yield demands or products with long shelf lives, they may be able to offer more diverse products and support more biodiversity in nature, too.

While local and organic aren't linked by definition, family farmers often grow sustainably, particularly when there's local demand. And it's easy to see how you might be more confident that the organic food produced by your local farmer is, indeed, meeting high-quality organic standards. Buying from – and talking directly to – local farmers better enables you to know the food is free of chemicals, pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Eating locally narrows the gap between us and the production of the food we eat.

4. *Other food for thought*

Local food production helps ensure better food security than food produced, processed, and distributed over monumental distances. That's because food produced on megafarms has greater potential for outbreaks of food-borne disease, and food with wide distribution, or from widely scattered areas, is harder to track. Local food is less vulnerable to contamination and easier to track in the event of a problem. Plus, supporting a strong regional food system helps ensure food resources and local self-reliance into the future.

How to Support Local Food

- *Learn what foods grow during which seasons in your area.* Then eat what's in season. In the Northwest, for example, hard squash and apples are naturally ripening to perfection in the fall, citrus show up in force in the winter, and you'll see

the most berries in June and July. (Check out the Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance's super-handly [Produce Calendar](#) to see what's in season when.)

Seasonality even applies to food besides produce – for example, goats are kidding in mid-winter, so there's usually a decrease in the availability of goat milk as the supply follows the animals' natural rhythms.

- *Store it.* Consider canning or storing in-season foods while they're at their best for use in later months.
- *Shop with your values.* Shop at stores and restaurants committed to supporting local family farmers.
- *Hit the market.* For the sake of variety and customer demand, Central Co-op does carry imported produce, but we try to carry local, seasonal produce whenever possible. Farmers markets are also spectacular sources of local foods, as well as fun community hubs. The [Cascade Harvest Coalition](#) is an excellent source of information, and advocate for, local farms and local food in our region.

For more on localism, check out these great resources:

[Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance](#)

[Cascade Harvest Coalition](#)

[Seattle Good Business Network](#)

[Community Sourced Capital](#)