

The benefits of being a locavore

Buying food from local producers is good for personal and environmental health. *by Karen Giles-Smith*

A stronger local economy. A healthier, sustainable environment. Fresh, safe food. These may all seem like pie-in-the-sky dreams, but they're not. There's a way to bring the pie down to earth: Buy the ingredients from local farmers.

Pam Catlin and her husband, Mike, are owners of Airy Acres Heirlooms in Mason. Catlin is passionate about produce and offers unique varieties at top quality. "I call it the freshness factor," she says. "When you buy food locally, you get the best taste and vital nutrients at the peak of freshness." Catlin sells over 50 varieties of her Certified Naturally Grown heirloom fruits and vegetables at the Mason Farmers' Market.

Buying and eating locally grown and produced food (*known as being a locavore*) is beneficial on many levels.

Safeguards personal, community and environmental health

Knowing how food is grown or raised allows you to choose food from farmers who avoid or reduce the use of pesticides, use environmentally-friendly and sustainable practices, take good care of their animals, preserve the soil and water quality, and treat farm workers fairly.

Connecting with local farmers offers the opportunity to ask questions about food production practices. It's not rude or inappropriate to ask. Farmers are consumers too, and realize the importance of being informed. "I wish people would ask me, 'Do you grow your own produce?'" says Catlin, "I start all my plants from seed, nurture them, harvest them and compost what's left. Not all vendors grow their own." When buying fruits and vegetables, other important questions include, "What type of fertilizer was used?" and "Were pesticides used? If so, what type?"

SustainableTable.org lists suggested questions for all types of food as well as information to help you evaluate the answers. From the farm to your fork, food travels 1,500 miles on average.



Pam Catlin, Airy Acres Heirlooms farm, Mason, arranges her organically homegrown flowers at the Mason Farmers' Market

Food coming from local farms doesn't have as far to go, which can reduce carbon dioxide emissions and packing materials. Eating locally also offers protection from bioterrorism. When food travels shorter distances, there's less chance of intentional contamination.

Another environmental benefit is that local family farms are more likely to encourage plant diversity which preserves native and heirloom plants; provides habitat for wildlife; reduces soil degradation and erosion; and decreases nutrient run-off into waterways.

Strengthens local economy

Buying local food supports family farms and keeps cash circulating in the community. When farmers sell directly to the community, farming is more profitable. This helps ensure that family farms will continue to thrive and that safe, flavorful food will be available for future generations. In turn, local family farms supply more local jobs (*compared to large,*

corporate-owned farms) and local farmers spend their money with local merchants.

"Wouldn't you rather buy from farmers you have met and know?" asks Catlin. "It's worth the little extra money and the trip to the farmers' market, roadside stand or CSA (*community supported agriculture program*)."

Get it fresh and full of flavor

Fresh food tastes better. Food from farmers' markets and CSAs are fresh from the farm—usually harvested no more than 24 hours earlier. Local farmers can offer varieties that have been bred for taste and freshness in contrast to hybrids that have been bred to withstand long-distance shipping (*up to 7-14 days*) and an extended shelf life.

"You see varieties at farmers' markets and CSAs that you wouldn't see at the grocery store," says Catlin. "Heirloom vegetables and fruits have soft, thinner skins so they don't travel well. But they're not crunchy, they're easier to slice, and they taste better." She enjoys showing people the array of unique colors and shapes of her heirloom fruits and vegetables: yellow raspberries, pleated tomatoes, tomatillos, round zucchini and Wapsipinicon Peach tomatoes, a medium-sized heirloom tomato originally from Iowa that's pink with a peach glow and fuzzy—it looks like a peach, but tastes like a tomato. "I love growing food," says Catlin. "But even better is growing something for people so they can experience something special like that."

"My goal is to offer the best possible produce for the money," says Catlin. "Eating locally is one of the best things you can do for health and longevity. One of the most important decisions is what you put in your body," she adds, "A fresh tomato sandwich on homemade bread—now that's food."