



Food Guide

Healthy Eating for a Healthy Economy: Why Regional and Seasonal Eating Is Important

The display of fruits and vegetables in the produce department of most local supermarkets gives few clues as to whether it's July or January. That's because of the tremendous and complex global sourcing capabilities that characterize the fruit and vegetable industry. Throughout the United States, we have become accustomed to having the same foods available year-round. Fresh produce from across the country and around the world is shipped to our supermarkets throughout the year.

So why is it important to eat seasonally and regionally? Because it's an enjoyable and healthful way to support family farms and maintain the agricultural landscapes and rural communities of the Northeast.

Impacts of Food Choices on the Rural Northeast

Farmers and nonfarmers alike enjoy the many benefits of our region's agricultural heritage. We appreciate the open spaces, green vistas, habitat for wildlife, protection of groundwater, and benefits to the rural economy. Agriculture and related businesses account directly for an important segment of local economies. In Monroe County, New York, alone, agriculture and its many related businesses contribute over \$180 million annually. Indirectly, agriculture supports other industries, such as tourism and recreation, that are vital to many rural areas. Increasingly, high-quality agricultural production is creating entrepreneurial opportunities in small-scale food processing.

To maintain these benefits, northeastern farms must remain viable. Studies have shown that rural communities with many family farms have robust economies and that with each farm lost, three to five other rural jobs are also lost. Where these losses occur, fewer farms are buying feed, seed, and fertilizer and supporting other local businesses. The loss of six farms (through consolidation, foreclosure, or development) can result in one failed rural business.¹ By shopping at local farmers' markets, farm stands, and stores that feature local produce, you are directly supporting local farmers and indirectly supporting the economies and landscapes that make the rural Northeast such an enjoyable place to live and visit.

In a recent survey of northeastern consumers, 98 percent of respondents indicated that it is important to keep farms viable, yet according to the USDA Census of Agriculture, the Northeast lost 24,746, nearly 15 percent, of the region's farms—an average loss of about 1,300 each year.² Though farms fail for many different reasons, many northeastern farmers would be unable to stay in business without the strong support of regional consumers. In the same survey, 97 percent of respondents considered that buying local produce is an effective way to keep farms viable in the Northeast.

In the 1920s there were nearly 7 million American farmers. Today fewer than 1 million Americans (less than 1 percent) claim farming as their primary occupation. As the proportion of the

consumer dollar captured by the farming sector decreases (now less than 10 cents), farmers struggle for viable markets. When consumers buy directly from farmers or request locally grown food at restaurants or grocery stores, the market for local agriculture becomes stronger.

Transporting fresh produce to the Northeast from other regions requires a significant amount of energy. If the price of gasoline continues to rise, the cost of transportation could eventually have an impact on food costs. In addition, environmental costs such as air pollution and increased resources needed to repair damage to our roadways are not accounted for in the price of our food. When food is transported great distances, it needs to be refrigerated, which uses energy and may require chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) or other ozone-depleting gases.

The Joy of Eating Seasonally and Regionally

Why settle for the less-than-fresh products imported thousands of miles when you can enjoy the diversity and freshness of locally grown foods? During the spring, summer, and fall, our region provides a bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Consider the personal benefits of eating locally grown foods:

- Fruits and vegetables are at their highest quality (both nutritionally and aesthetically) when they are allowed to reach peak ripeness, are handled carefully after harvest, and

reach the consumer in the shortest time possible. This is most likely to occur when produce is consumed near the place it is grown.

- Produce that is picked when fully ripe such as tomatoes not only tastes better, it is more nutritious. When allowed to ripen fully on the vine, tomatoes develop higher levels of vitamin C. This is important when one considers that tomatoes make up nearly a quarter of the total vegetable consumption of U.S. consumers.
- Local, community-based food systems often provide a more varied food supply than the dominant system. In local food systems, farmers are able to respond to diverse customer interests in different varieties, marketing those that are well suited to local growing conditions. In the dominant agriculture system, produce varieties are likely to be chosen for their ability to ripen simultaneously, withstand harvesting equipment and long-distance shipping, and exhibit long shelf life in the store. Only selected varieties of each fruit and vegetable meet those rigorous demands, so there is little genetic diversity in the plants grown.
- When you buy local produce directly from a farmer—such as at a farmers' market or roadside stand—all of your food dollar goes to the farmer. In contrast, for every dollar spent on food at the supermarket, only 19 cents goes to pay for the farm value share,³ and 61 cents goes to pay for the “marketing bill”—the various services and materials required to

market food, such as labor, packaging, transportation, and energy.

- The farm value share has declined continuously from 41 percent in 1950 to 19 percent in 2000. This decline reflects the large supplies of farm products that have held down farm prices, while rising processing and distribution expenditures for food marketing services have caused retail food expenditures to rise.
- Fresh local produce that has been handled properly after harvesting and is marketed quickly will be very high in quality. The produce is thus more likely to be eaten than produce that is marketed several days after harvest and transported great distances.

There are other, less tangible benefits to regional and seasonal eating. Eating foods grown in the Northeast can help you become more aware of local agricultural cycles, harvest seasons, and local weather that affect crops. Eating produce in season leads to a heightened sense of awareness and excitement as the season for your favorite local produce arrives. Once you've tasted a juicy, local vine-ripened tomato at the peak of the season, it may be difficult to recognize the hard, pink tomato often seen in stores in the middle of winter. If you are like most consumers in the Northeast, you will agree that local fruits and vegetables are fresher, taste better, and look better than produce that is shipped in from other states and countries.⁴

Of course, as with any change, eating regionally and seasonally will be easier if you make changes gradually. Much of the process has to do with remembering to think about it when you shop. Use the fact sheet *Becoming a Regional and Seasonal Eater* to help guide you.

No matter what steps you take to add regional and seasonal foods to your diet, enjoy the delicious taste, vibrant health, and good feelings that they provide.

¹Orr, D. W. 1991. “Prices and the Life Exchanged: Costs of the U.S. Food System.” In G. Younberg and O. Doering (eds.), *Understanding the True Cost of Food: Considerations for a Sustainable Food System*. Symposium Proceedings. Greenbelt, Md.: Institute for Alternative Agriculture.

²USDA. Census of Agriculture. National Agricultural Statistics Service, 1978–1992. www.nass.usda.gov/census/

³Economic Research Service/USDA. Food marketing and price spreads: USDA marketing bill. The farm value share is computed by dividing the farm value by consumer food expenditures and is reported as a percentage. Over time, the share reflects relative changes in expenditures for farm products, food marketing services, and retail food products. www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodpricespreads/bill/ (updated June 21, 2002).

⁴In a survey of consumers in the Northeast, 62 percent felt that local produce tasted better; 88 percent, that it was fresher; and 60 percent, that it looked better than imported fruits and vegetables.

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