



# Food Guide

## Becoming a Regional and Seasonal Eater

Perhaps you've seen the words "in season" at your supermarket or on a restaurant menu. Have you ever wondered what that means? What season are we talking about and when does it occur?

Plant foods—vegetables, fruits, grains, dry beans, and peas—are in season just after they're harvested and become available at their peak quality. Because of the varied climate of the Northeast, different foods are available from local harvest at different times of the year. Foods in season here may not be in season at the same time in other regions and countries. Harvest times can also differ, although less dramatically, from one county to the next. The existence of "microclimates" can mean frost in one farmer's field but not the neighbor's!

For several fruits and vegetables the "availability" period is longer than the harvest period. Root vegetables—such as potatoes, onions, rutabagas, turnips, parsnips—store well for a long time, which makes them available "fresh" months after harvest.

### What Is a Season?

Although the first official day of spring is March 21 it can still feel like late winter. While some people in the Northeast region are enjoying apple blossoms, others are still shoveling their sidewalks. So, how do farmers define seasons?

The agricultural definition is based on frost dates, times when the temperature falls below freezing. The last frost date for your area—meaning the last day in the spring on average that the temperature will fall below freezing—marks the time when spring produce will begin to mature and be ready for harvest. Farmers plant early spring produce

before the last frost. Some crops, like garlic and certain grains, are planted the previous fall. As spring progresses, look for peas, asparagus, dandelions, herbs, green onion, rhubarb, radishes, and all kinds of tender, tasty greens. Early-maturing broccoli, cauliflower, turnips, beets, strawberries, and blueberries can make an appearance in area farmers' markets as early as June.

Around this last frost date, many vegetable farmers plant summer crops such as tomatoes, corn, beans, squash, and peppers. Also notice that in springtime some dairy cows are put out on pasture to graze the lush grass. Many farmers make their first cutting of hay at this time as well.

Summer produce is ready six weeks (green beans) to eight or nine weeks (tomatoes) after planting. During the summer be sure to enjoy peaches, plums, cherries, melons, and berries. Sweet corn, on or off the cob, is another late-summer treat.

The first frost marks the end of summer and the transition to fall. If you don't have a garden, you may not notice the first frost because it may occur overnight while it is still warm during the day. Pay close attention to your local weather forecasts or call your county Cooperative Extension office to get information on frost dates for your area. Most summer vegetables cannot survive freezing temperatures, but fall crops thrive in cooler weather. Farmers count on a frost to "sweeten" crops like fall broccoli, cabbages, Brussels sprouts, kale, and grapes. Most farmers plant garlic in mid-October—on the waning of the first full moon after the first frost—for spring greens and summer bulbs.

Once there is a long stretch of cold weather, winter produce begins to replace fall produce. Some winter crops, such as kale or leeks, are available only for the first month or two of the winter in harsher climates. In milder climates, these more tender crops may be available all winter. Most winter favorites such as potatoes, onions, parsnips, carrots, cabbage, winter squash, apples, and beets, as well as less familiar vegetables such as burdock, rutabagas, and Jerusalem artichokes, are harvested in the late fall and stored through the winter. It's no coincidence that we associate hearty crops like these with wonderful warming soups and stews. For variety, enjoy foods like mushrooms and sprouts, which are available year-round, and spring, summer, and fall produce preserved by canning, storing, or freezing.

As winter fades and temperatures rise, watch for the last frost date in the spring. It will soon be time for spring produce and the beginning of another cycle.

Some farmers, especially in areas that have shorter growing seasons, are experimenting with ways to extend the growing season at both ends. For example, some crops are grown in greenhouses or covered by structures to protect them from the frost.

### Tip on Eating Regionally and Seasonally

Choosing northeastern foods in season is a healthful and delicious way to enjoy the cycle of the year. Here are some tips on how to join the celebration.

### Eating Northeast Foods

- When you choose produce in your food store, notice where it was

grown. This may sound simple, but not many people do it. If you have the option of buying a locally grown item, do so. Remember, how you choose to spend your food dollars makes a difference.

- In the summer when your local farmers' market is operating, make a commitment to spend at least \$10 a week on locally produced foods at the market. If everyone did this, it would mean a tremendous economic boost for local agriculture without a significant monetary outlay per person.
- If there is no farmers' market near you, get one started. Organize a group of people who, like you, are interested in having local foods available directly from producers. Farmers are reluctant to risk starting a market unless there is clear interest and indication that people will support their effort through purchases. The Farmers' Market Association in your area and your state department of agriculture can provide assistance to groups wanting to initiate a new farmers' market.
- Several juices and ciders—particularly cranberry, grape, and apple—are made from fruits grown in the Northeast. Try to find those made from regional sources. Supermarket managers are becoming aware that using the words "local" and "locally grown" is good marketing for business, so it may be getting easier to identify what foods come from local sources. But a word of caution: there is currently no legal definition for these terms. So the best strategy is to ask the produce manager.
- If you're not sure where produce was grown, ask your supermarket produce

department to post signs identifying where produce is from and to offer items from northeastern farms whenever possible.

- Become a member of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. Picking up your weekly share from a CSA farm is one of the best ways to learn first hand what is grown locally and when it is available. Many CSA farms also provide recipe ideas for how to use the products that you will receive. (For information on CSA see [www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/](http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/).)
- When eating at a restaurant, order foods that are (or can be) produced in the region. Some restaurants currently specialize in creating menus from local foods as well as foods produced using sustainable methods.
- Get involved in food planning committees at schools and other institutions in your area to explore ways that local foods can be incorporated into food service. Help identify local and regional alternatives to current purchases.

### Eating with the Seasons

Here are some easy and fun ways to start incorporating local foods in your diet throughout the seasons. Although it is not reasonable to try to convert your entire diet to local, seasonal foods, you can make many small changes during the year.

In the spring, summer, and fall

- Visit a U-pick farm and pick enough to can or freeze some of what you pick. Berries and cherries are easy to freeze: put them on a cookie sheet and place it in the freezer; after they're frozen, store them in small airtight plastic bags in the freezer. Your county's Cooperative Extension office is a good source of information on freezing and canning.

- Buy produce from a farmers' market or farm stand or choose produce identified as "local" at your supermarket or food store. Sweet corn is fresher—and usually sweeter—right after picking, and tomatoes can be tastier and juicier when they're vine (versus ethylene) ripened.

In the winter

- Be sure to include some of the following familiar fruits and vegetables in your diet: potatoes, winter squash, carrots, cabbage, burdock, onions, beets, garlic, apples, and pears.
- Try at least two of these less familiar vegetables: celeriac, Jerusalem artichokes, burdock, kale, parsnips, rutabagas, turnips, and kohlrabi.
- Explore the wide variety of northeastern-grown produce that is canned, frozen, dried, and stored. Small-scale food processing is a growing phenomenon in the Northeast and may mean that it will be easier to find foods preserved from the local harvest in the near future.

Year-round

- Use the Northeast Regional Food Guide to learn which foods are not available fresh in the Northeast during the winter. To become a more seasonal eater, start replacing one or two "imported" items that you eat often with locally produced alternatives. For example, use local tomatoes instead of imported ones, celeriac instead of celery in your cooking.
- If there is a winter CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm in your area, become a member or split a "share" with a friend.
- Don't worry—the Northeast is nutritionally complete! A nutritional analysis of the Northeast Regional Food Guide showed that a diet composed of foods from the region more than adequately met nutrient requirements for good health—even in winter.<sup>1</sup>

## CORNELL Cooperative Extension

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