

Choosing local food

What is “local”?

There is no universal definition for “local” food. Many people use a 100-mile radius to define local.¹ Emory has defined local in two tiers to meet our sustainable food initiative goals for purchasing: 1. Georgia, and 2. the eight-state Southern region including Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Mississippi. When possible, food is purchased from within Georgia, but the broader region recognizes the limits of the Georgia growing season.²

Benefits of local food

Economic

Buying local food keeps dollars circulating in the local community. Getting to know the farmers who grow your food builds relationships based on understanding and trust, the foundation of strong communities. Independent, family-owned farms supply more local jobs and contribute to the local economy at higher rates than do large, corporate-owned farms. However, it is important to remember that local food can be produced on farms of any scale.³

Shopping at farmers markets and farm stands or joining a farm’s Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program are ways to purchase directly from the farmer. Consumers can promote the local food economy by asking grocery store managers if they sell any local food items and encourage them to do so if they do not already. Restaurant goers can patronize restaurants that utilize local food and support local farmers.

Freshness

Most fruit and vegetable varieties sold in supermarkets are chosen for their ability to withstand industrial harvesting equipment and extended travel, not taste. Since local food does not have to be transported long distances, local farmers can offer produce varieties bred for taste and freshness rather than for shipping and long shelf life.³

Health

Knowing where food comes from and how it is grown or raised enables the consumer to choose food from farmers who avoid or reduce their use of chemicals, pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, or genetically modified seed in their operations.³ However, not all local farmers avoid such practices as pesticide use or supplementary hormones, so it is important to buy food from farmers who produce food in a manner that is consistent with your values.

Environment

Local food does not have to travel far. This reduces carbon dioxide emissions and packing materials. However, some food that is grown locally may be transported long distances for processing. Buying local food also helps to make farming more profitable and selling farmland for development less attractive. Consumers vote with their food dollar when they purchase local food. This ensures that local farms will continue to thrive.³

Where to find local food

Georgia Organics has several resources for consumers looking for locally grown food. Their Organic Directory and Local Food Guide (http://georgiaorganics.org/organic_directory/) lists Georgia farmers' markets, CSAs, and businesses that promote local and sustainable food.⁴ They also have a Google Map of their Local Food Guide that easily provides driving directions to farms and CSA locations, farmers' markets, restaurants with local food, and grocers and specialty retailers.⁵

Summary

Purchase and consumption of local food has numerous benefits. However, the production of local food does not necessarily include sustainable farming practices or ethical treatment of farm workers. Local food is not automatically fresher or better for the environment.⁶ Local food can be produced on large conventional farms, but building relationships with local farmers to learn about their growing practices is the best way to ensure that your local food is grown in a sustainable and ethical manner.

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¹ DeWeerd, Sarah. 2009. Is Local Food Better? *World Watch* 22(3): 6-10.

² Emory University Office of Sustainability. <<http://sustainability.emory.edu/page/1008/Sustainable-Food>>

³ Buy Fresh Buy Local California. <http://guide.buylocalca.org/whyLocal.html>

⁴ Georgia Organics, Organic Directory. <http://georgiaorganics.org/organic_directory/>

⁵ Georgia Organics, Local Food Guide (Google Map).

<<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&msa=0&msid=117467117957426399944.0004468dbe7c241b66e6c&z=9>>

⁶ DeWeerd, Sarah. 2009. Local Food: The Economics. *World Watch* 22(4): 20-24.