
Eating Locally, Seasonally, and Sustainably

The food choices you make create a cycle that affects you and our environment. When you choose local, seasonal, and sustainable foods, you support farming practices that promote human wellbeing and support a healthy planet. This guide defines local, seasonal, and sustainable foods and offers ideas for making thoughtful food choices that sustain people and the planet.

What are Local, Seasonal, and Sustainable Foods?

Eating local, seasonal, and sustainable food is becoming more popular, but what do these terms mean?

Local foods are grown close to where you live, such as in your state or region.¹

Seasonal foods are grown outdoors during the natural growing season and are available during certain times of the year. Food can be globally seasonal or locally seasonal.¹

Globally seasonal food refers to food produced during the natural growing season in a specific part of the world, even if the food is consumed far from where it is produced.¹ Apples grown in New Zealand are globally seasonal when they are shipped to the U.S. and eaten in the spring.

Locally seasonal food is produced outdoors during the natural growing season in a specific region and consumed close to where it was grown.¹ Peaches grown and eaten in the summer in Colorado are an example of a locally seasonal food.

A sustainable food system is one in which people have access to enough nutritious foods now and for generations to come.² Sustainable foods, such as organically grown or regeneratively grown foods, also have a positive or neutral effect on the environment by requiring less water and farming chemicals to grow, promoting soil health, and supporting diverse plants and animals.²

The Potential Health Benefits

Buying local, seasonal, and sustainable food is associated with multiple health benefits:

- **Higher nutritional value:** Nutrients in fruits and vegetables often decrease during transport and storage.³⁻⁵ Plant foods from your garden or another local grower may contain higher levels of nutrients than foods that were grown far away. For example, homegrown and locally grown lettuce contain higher levels of vitamin C and phytonutrients than supermarket lettuce that is grown and

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Falling Fruit](#): Locate public fruit trees and edible plants across the globe.
- [Pickyourown.org](#): Search for farms where you can pick your own fruits and vegetables in the U.S. and many other countries.
- [Localharvest](#): Lists CSAs across the U.S. In other countries, search online for “community supported agriculture near me.”
- [FRAMA Farmer’s Market Locator](#): This resource can help you find farmer’s markets around the world.
- [World Farmer’s Market Coalition](#): Another resource for locating farmer’s markets around the world.

shipped from farther away.⁶ Also, some vitamins and phytonutrients are higher in organically grown foods than conventionally grown foods.⁷

- **More flavor:** If you’ve compared the taste of an out-of-season tomato to an in-season tomato picked fresh from the vine, you’ve likely experienced the difference between these two types of tomatoes. Foods sold out of season or that traveled long distances to get to you may be less flavorful than food grown locally because they are picked before they are ripe, and foods lose flavor compounds during transport.^{8,9} The great flavors of local and seasonal fruits and vegetables may motivate you to eat more plant foods.
- **Reduced exposure to pesticides and herbicides:** Eating organic food is associated with lower pesticide and herbicide levels in the body.¹⁰⁻¹³ Pesticides kill insects and herbicides kill weeds. Pesticide exposure is associated with an increased risk of Parkinson’s disease,¹⁴ cardiovascular disease,¹⁵ colon cancer,¹⁶ harmful effects on sperm health,¹⁷ asthma, wheezing, and diabetes.¹⁸ Herbicide exposure is associated with cancer¹⁹ and reduced fertility.²⁰

Additional Benefits

The potential benefits of local, seasonal, and sustainable food extend beyond health benefits to include:

- **A smaller impact on the environment:** Eating locally grown food is associated with lower environmental impacts, such as reduced fossil fuel use.²¹ Purchasing organic food supports farms that aren’t releasing harmful pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals into the environment.
- **Protection of heritage plant foods:** Many plant foods produced on a large scale are bred for high yields and a consistent appearance, crowding out heritage foods. Examples of heritage foods include different types of corn used by Native American and Central American people and organic soybeans. Eating locally may support farmers who grow non-genetically modified (non-GMO), heritage varieties of fruits and vegetables.²²
- **Reduced exposure of farmers to farming chemicals:** Conventional farming exposes farm workers to harmful chemicals, including pesticides and herbicides. By choosing sustainably grown food, you may support farms that use less of these chemicals, and farm workers may be less exposed.^{23,24}
- **Support small farms:** Eating local, seasonal, and sustainable food may help support small farms that benefit farm workers and the environment.
- **Save money:** Some local fruits and vegetables are less expensive when eaten in-season, compared to out-of-season.²⁵ Eating seasonally may be one way to reduce your grocery bill.

How to Eat Locally, Seasonally, and Sustainably

Eating locally, seasonally, and sustainably takes some planning. Here are ways to add more local, seasonal, and sustainable foods to your diet.

1. **Consider your food budget.** Decide how you’d like to set aside money to buy local, seasonal, and/or sustainable food. While organic food is often more expensive than conventionally grown food,²⁶ buying organic may be worthwhile

for certain fruits and vegetables that are heavily sprayed with pesticides. Keep in mind that many small farms that use organic practices aren't organic certified,²⁷ and this may keep the price of their products down. In the U.S., people who qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can use their benefits at some farmer's markets.²⁸

- 2. Find a farmer's market or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm near you.** Locate sources of local food, such as a farmer's market or CSA. A CSA is a system in which people buy a share of a farm's harvest and receive boxes of fresh, seasonal produce regularly during the growing season. CSA's often use sustainable farming practices, such as organic practices.
- 3. Learn about seasonal foods in your area.** If you are interested in sourcing seasonal food, learn which foods are in season near you.
- 4. Find sustainable foods near you.** You can look for certified organic foods at the grocery store, big box store, or at a farmer's market. Organic certification is expensive, so some small farms may sell pesticide- and herbicide-free produce without an official organic certification. Ask farmers to learn more about their sustainable farming practices.
- 5. Grow food at home or in a community garden.** This could be as simple as growing a couple of potted herbs or complex as creating a vegetable garden. Growing your own food is linked to an increased vegetable intake,²⁹ increased physical activity,³⁰ and improved mental health.³¹

A qualified nutrition professional can help you plan your food budget, including prioritizing local, seasonal, and sustainable foods in your diet and accessing them in your area.

Eating Local, Seasonal, and Sustainable Foods Doesn't Need to be Perfect

Eating local, seasonal, and sustainable foods can support your health and the environment, but you don't have to check all the boxes at once. The reality is that each approach has tradeoffs.

Local foods aren't always organic or grown with fewer chemicals. A locally grown strawberry might still be sprayed with pesticides. "Local" doesn't always mean a food was grown with a lower environmental impact, such as lower emissions. For example, a food grown in a heated greenhouse all winter may use more energy than one grown outdoors and shipped from many miles away.

Seasonal foods aren't always sustainable either. Some seasonal fruits and vegetables are heavily sprayed with pesticides or need a lot of water to grow. Preserved seasonal foods, such as canned tomatoes or frozen berries, can be a perfectly healthy option to eat year-round.

Sustainable foods, including certified organic and regeneratively grown foods, can be expensive. Some may be shipped to your area from distant places.

Try not to limit yourself to all-or-nothing thinking. Do the best you can with the resources available to you and where you live. Taking steps to incorporate some local, seasonal, and sustainable foods into your diet will support your health and that of the planet, no major dietary overhaul required.



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