

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

Choose Local Produce for Optimum Nutrition

You probably know that nutrient-packed fruits and vegetables are an important part of a wholesome diet. But did you know that not all produce is created equal? Dr. Smith wants patients to learn more.



More and more people are passing over grocery store fruits and vegetables in favor of those grown on small local farms — or even in their own backyards. Advantages of locally grown food include reduced environmental impact and support of the local economy. Altruism aside, many proponents of eating locally — or “locavores”— say that local food not only tastes better but is also better for you.

With the temperature rising, farmers’ markets opening and home gardeners planting, consider embracing the locavore way of eating. Dr. Smith investigates several reasons why locally grown produce may be the best choice for your health.

The Fresh Difference

According to one report from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, the fruits and vegetables offered at a typical grocery store travel an average of 1,500 miles to get there from the farm. This means that they are picked several days before you buy them.

Several studies indicate that the nutrient content — particularly vitamin C — degrades quickly once produce is picked. For instance, a red pepper may lose 25 percent of its vitamin C within 10 days of harvest, while chard can lose a whopping 60 percent of its vitamin C within a week (*Int J Food Sci Nutr* 2005;56:45-51; *J Food Sci* 2008;73:S314-20). In contrast, Dr. Smith reminds patients that locally grown crops move quickly from field to table, maintaining higher levels of nutrients.

What happens during transit can also affect nutrient levels in fruits and vegetables. Both mechanical harvesting and lengthy transport can bruise produce, resulting in loss of nutrients. Time in storage and transfer may leave the crop susceptible to spoilage, pests and disease (*Crit Rev Food Sci Nutr* 2005;45:623-44). On the other hand, smaller local farms turn out fruits and vegetables that are less handled.

Ripeness also makes a difference — consider the contrast between the robust flavor of a home-grown tomato and the anemic taste of a grocery store tomato. Some crops, like tomatoes, must be picked before they are fully ripe if they are to survive the long journey to the market.

Tomatoes grown for local consumption fully ripen on the vine, which translates into not only superior flavor but also a bigger nutritional punch. Vine-ripened tomatoes contain higher levels of vitamin C, carotenoids and



other antioxidants (*J Sci Food Agric* 2003;83:369-82).

A Delicious Variety

Another advantage of locally grown produce is the diversity of varieties available. Large-scale farmers focus on a small range of varieties for mass markets, usually chosen for durability in shipping. Roma tomatoes, red delicious apples and romaine lettuce are available in almost any grocery store because they lend themselves well to large-scale production and shipping. Farmers growing for local sales — as well as backyard gardeners — are free to choose varieties based on flavor, nutrition and even novelty.



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Diversity in fruit and vegetable options translates to a more nutritionally balanced plate for the consumer. That's why nutrition experts recommend sampling several of the options your local farmers offer. Individual varieties of the same fruit or vegetable offer not only distinct flavors but also distinct nutritional profiles.

For example, researchers found that different cultivars of carrots offer varying rations of disease-fighting phytochemicals and vitamin A (*J Agric Food Chem* 2009;57:11134-9).

Organic Practices Mean Healthier Food

Many small-scale farms follow organic growing practices to maintain soil and plant health. These techniques produce nutritionally superior fruits and vegetables, according to a 2007 report from the research and advocacy group The Organic Center.

Unlike the all-at-once nutrient boost of synthetic fertilizers, composted manure and other organic fertilizers offer a slow and steady release of nutrients — allowing plants to absorb more of them.

Organic methods also result in crops with deeper roots, which absorb additional nutrients. Other research shows

that the excess nitrogen included in synthetic fertilizers causes crops to contain too many nitrates, reduced essential amino acids and overall lower nutritional quality (*J Plant Nutr* 2009;32:598-609).

Studies link organic production methods to higher levels of minerals, fiber, and antioxidants in several crops, including tomatoes, carrots and even spices like paprika (*Orv Hetil* 2006; 147:2081-90; *Rocz Panstw Zakl Hig* 2009;60:217-20; *Rocz Panstw Zakl Hig* 2007;58:77-82).

Go Local for Food Safety

Recent widespread outbreaks of food-borne illnesses have called into question the safety of large-scale production. For example, investigators traced a salmonella outbreak in the United States to jalapeño and serrano peppers imported from Mexico.

It took several months to find the source of the outbreak, which sickened over 1,400 people. This raised many questions about the safety of a food system in which the source was so difficult to trace and one contaminated harvest harmed so many consumers (*J Public Health Manag Pract* 2010;16:221-31; *Mod Healthc* 2009;39:28-30, 32).

Choosing locally grown food means a much shorter path to trace in case of food contamination, which is less likely to occur in the first place due to practices employed by many small-scale farmers (*Orv Hetil* 2006; 147:2081-90).



The ability to interact directly with the farmer who grew the vegetable in your salad means that you can ask him or her questions about other food safety issues that concern you, such as pesticide use and genetically modified crops. Many farmers welcome customers to visit their farms.

Where to Find Local Produce

You can find locally grown fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets and farm stands, as well as through food co-ops, you-pick farms and community supported agriculture programs (also called CSAs or farm boxes). Try one of these web directories to find local food resources in your community:

www.localharvest.org
www.findfresh.ca
www.organicfooddirectory.com.au

To learn more about growing your own food, whether by the pot or by the acre, check out:

www.motherearthnews.com/organic-gardening
www.canadiangardening.com
www.gardeningaustralia.com.au

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