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Local Food: Does It Matter What You Eat?

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Everybody eats. Period. Some of us prefer hamburgers. Some like veggies. Almost all like to choose items from the “cake food group.” (Okay. That’s not really in the food pyramid.)

But *what* you eat is only the beginning. Here’s something else to ask yourself: Does it matter *where* your food comes from? Is there any difference between tomatoes grown locally vs. those that arrive on a truck from 1,500 miles away? What does *chemical ripening* of fruits and vegetables mean? Is that safe? Can what you eat really impact the environment ... positively or negatively?

The goal of this project is to learn about what you eat, where it comes from, and how it impacts the environment. You will learn about the concept of **local food systems**, how they

operate, and how you and your family can be involved in creating positive changes. As they say, “You are what you eat.” And if that’s true, you must ask if you are eating in a manner that positively affects your 4-H club, your community, your country, and your world.

Why local food?

Have you been hearing the recent news reports on local foods? It seems more and more people are planting gardens or making a point to buy their food from a farmer in their local community. Why do you suppose that is? Do you think locally grown food is healthier,

Plan Your Project

Use this idea starter AND publication 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide* as the starting place for your 4-H self-determined project. The *Self-Determined Project Guide* is available from your county OSU Extension office or on the web at www.ohio4h.org/selfdetermined. You may choose to do a little or a lot depending on your level of interest. Be sure to register your project with your county OSU Extension office.

fresher, cleaner, or better tasting? There's certainly a lot to consider!

Let's begin with the news reports. Along with the local foods interests, other stories detail all kinds of food recalls. It seems that every month you hear about another batch of contaminated food along with warnings about eating it. Killer peanut butter. Killer spinach. Killer dog food. What's next? Is some contaminated item already in your freezer? Help!

Clearly, the big question today is this: Can we do anything to ensure a safe and nutritious food supply? Luckily, the short answer is yes.

Basic **supply-and-demand economics** can and will influence a market. This holds true with the local foods market. What do these words mean? Well, if customers demand (I prefer to ask politely) that their local grocers and restaurants sell locally grown foods, the grocers and restaurants will begin thinking about doing it. And thinking about it is a start. Then, as the demand increases and people stop shopping in stores that don't sell local produce and DO shop in stores that do, the shops really take notice and begin offering selections from local farms. They *supply* what the customer *demands* or the customer goes somewhere else!

Now, the next question is this: Does it really matter? Is the local food better? Is it less likely to be contaminated? Again, the quick answer is yes. There are quite a few reasons to buy locally grown

and produced foods. The Rural Life Center at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, produced a brief fact sheet providing some key points.

1. **Freshness.** Local fruits and vegetables are usually harvested and sold more quickly so they do not contain the preservatives that are added to products shipped long distances and placed in storage.
2. **Taste.** Produce that is ripened on the vine has better texture and flavor than produce harvested unripe, then treated with chemicals and ripened during shipping.
3. **Nutrition.** Nutritional value declines — often drastically — as time passes after harvesting.
4. **Improving the local economy.** When you buy homegrown food, you circulate your food dollars inside the local area.
5. **Strengthening producer/consumer relations.** When purchasing food locally, consumers can ask how the product was grown and processed, what chemicals (if any) were used, and any other questions they may have. People tend to trust individuals they know, and they become repeat buyers.

What about the environment?

On average, most food travels over 1,500 miles before it reaches our plates. These are called **food miles**. That distance obviously has a negative impact on the

environment. Transportation costs (by truck, rail, or air) must be added to the price each of us pays. The transporting vehicle burns fossil fuels that pollute the environment. Often, packaging is heavier to protect contents traveling great distances. And preservatives may be applied to maintain freshness. All of these things have a negative impact on the environment.

Next, **economies of scale** must be considered. What does that mean? Well, to give an example, one large truck that carries 50,000 pounds of tomatoes may cause less pollution than 50 smaller trucks carrying 1,000 pounds each. However, the packaging, preservatives, and lack of freshness still remain as negatives. And don't forget the money. Would you rather help create and maintain food-related jobs in your local community or send your dollars out of state?

To really understand what's most important about the food we eat, we need to understand the entire food system.

What is a food system?

A food system is the often complex network of food producers (farmers), food consumers (eaters), and the businesses that link them together. The five key links of this food-chain are (1) production, (2) distribution, (3) processing, (4) consumption, and (5) waste recovery.

A local food system does more than just connect growers, businesses, and consumers in a

The five key links of the food-chain are

1. Production 2. Distribution 3. Processing 4. Consumption 5. Waste Recovery

region. It considers the bigger issues of health and nutrition, economic development, environmental sustainability, and overall community strength. Together, these elements greatly impact how people in a community live and interact. Increasingly, these elements are governed by food policies.

What is food policy?

A food policy consists of the rules and regulations that govern how food is produced and distributed. These are generally run by a Food Policy Council whose primary goal is to cultivate a stronger and more sustainable local food system in order to bring benefits to residents of a region. Some of these include

- **Food access:** Many inner-city neighborhoods are considered “food deserts” where it’s difficult for residents to find foods needed to support a healthy diet. The supermarkets have left the neighborhoods and the only place to buy food is at a convenience store. Locally based food systems can help connect local growers and urban residents, adding to the availability of healthy foods.
- **Health and nutrition:** A local food policy can help increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables. This can help balance the tendency in our society to eat highly processed “fast foods” that cause heart disease, diabetes, and other diet-related illnesses. Also, a food policy can encourage improved institutional nutrition standards at schools, hospitals, businesses, etc.

- **Community development:** Farmers’ markets, quick-stop fresh-food centers, community and market gardens, and other outlets for local food can improve health in neighborhoods while creating spaces for people to gather, socialize, learn, and enjoy life as a community.
- **Economic development:** There are many new business opportunities in food production, distribution, processing, and restaurant or food service operations.
- **Urban agriculture and gardening:** Many cities have seen population loss from downtown and close-in neighborhoods in recent years. Vacant lots provide opportunities for green space to support community gardens, market gardens, or native plant preserves. These increase the supply of healthy foods.
- **Environmental sustainability:** Since most food travels so far, increasing the use of local food can reduce reliance on

fossil fuels and related carbon emissions.

- **Urban-rural partnerships:** Local food systems can help connect urban and rural populations by encouraging social interaction and business partnerships. This helps build stronger regional economies.

How about our food rights?

Everyone has certain rights. Right? Our nation’s founders wrote the Bill of Rights to guarantee individual freedoms. More recently, an Air Traveler’s Bill of Rights was proposed to protect passengers after hundreds of travelers were stranded on an airplane for 16 hours with no food, drink, or bathrooms.

But what about food? People can die from eating contaminated food. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference recently proposed an Eaters’ Bill of Rights. It outlines the basic rights of having safe, nutritious, and affordable food. Some highlights are listed in the box below.

Eaters’ Bill of Rights

- Eaters have a right to safe and nutritious food.
- Eaters around the world have a right to a secure food system.
- Eaters have a right to good food at a fair price.
- Eaters have a right to know if food is produced locally or transported for thousands of miles.
- Eaters have a right to know whether food has been genetically modified.
- Eaters have a right to food produced without harming air, water, or land.
- Eaters have a right to food produced under socially just circumstances.
- Eaters have a right to know the conditions of their food production:
 - Is the environment harmed?
 - Are the animals treated with dignity and respect?
 - Is the food produced on farms by family farmers or by factories?
 - Are the farmers paid a just wage?
 - Do farm workers have safe and healthy working conditions?

Areas of Interest and Things to Do

Every self-determined project can be broken down into areas of interest. These are specific things members want to address during their project adventure. Using 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide*, identify at least three (3) areas of interest with at least three (3) activities per area to explore. Take your ideas from the list below or make up your own.

Food at Your House: What's in your refrigerator?

- Meal Planning:** Incorporate at least 2 locally grown or produced foods into your family meals each week for one month. (Next month, try for three or four!)
- Family Food Assessment:** Survey your family's eating habits. Make a list of the types of foods your family eats. Think about whether some of these foods can be purchased from local growers or producers. Discuss this during a meal with your family. What do they think?
- Family Food Survey:** Review your family's food shopping habits.
 1. Make a list of the stores where your family *usually* buys their food.
 2. Are the stores owned locally or are they regional/ national chains?
 3. Why does your family choose to shop there?
 4. Does your family ever shop at farmers' markets?
 5. If not, what would make them stop and shop there?
 6. Are you concerned with food safety? List 4 things that might cause concerns.
 7. Are you aware of the food eco-footprint? List 4 ways that food production and distribution might negatively impact the environment.

- Start a compost bin in your kitchen. Keep it clean and fresh by emptying it every few days into a compost pile outside. Go online and check out "Composting for Kids" from Texas A&M Extension Service at <http://sustainable.tamu.edu/kindergarden/kidscompost/cover.html>
- Plan and plant a small garden this spring (if you don't have one already). If space is an issue, try cherry tomatoes, herbs, beans, or snow peas in patio or window sill pots.
- Do a report for your class or club meeting on what you've discovered under the "Food at Your House" topic.

Food at Your School: What are they serving?

- Ask your school cafeteria director if they serve any local foods. Dig deep. Ask why or why not?
- Do a quick Internet search on "local food in schools" and write a short essay (2 or 3 paragraphs) describing your findings. Could your school participate? What foods would be easy to begin with?
- Organize a campaign to ask your school to offer fruit that is grown locally. Include vending machines!
- Share "Related Resources" (found on the next page), like "Farm to School" with your school principal.

Food in Your Community: Where can you buy local foods?

- Start where you shop! Ask your supermarket produce manager if they purchase foods that are grown or produced locally. Dig deep. Ask for their definition of "local." Do they consider it within a 50-mile radius? Or is it 250 miles? Not all "local" labels are equal.
- Investigate restaurants in your town that serve locally grown or produced foods. The next time your family eats out, ask to go to one of them. (And remember to tell the restaurant *why* you chose them!)
- Investigate farmers' markets in your area. How many are there? What days/hours do they operate? What types of foods and products do they sell?
- CSA Sign-Up:** Go online and search for any Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) or Food Co-Op operating in your area. Investigate the pricing structure. Compare it to supermarket expenses. Discuss with your family the benefits of fresh food, and what it means to buy directly from a local farmer. If they agree, sign up for the program!
- Do a report for your class or club on what you've discovered under this "Food in Your Community" topic.

Food in Your World: Where does it come from? Is there a balance between local and far?

- Conduct a food-origins survey: Go to any grocery store, look at the fruit, and make a list of all the *countries* (non-U.S.) the fruit comes from. Which is farthest away? Which is closest? What one surprised you most? Is there one you've never heard of?
- Make a list of foods that are difficult or impossible to get "locally" (e.g., bananas, papaya, coffee ... unless you live in Central America or the Tropics!)
- Tag along on your family's next grocery store trip and ask if you can purchase some fruit or vegetable that you've never eaten before. What country does it come from? Do you like the taste? What are the nutritional benefits (naturally occurring vitamins)? Would you buy it again?
- Do a quick Internet search on "fair trade" foods. Is this labeling system helpful to people in other countries? Do you think it helps the environment? Write a short essay (2 or 3 paragraphs) on why or why not.
- Write a short essay (2 or 3 paragraphs) on why it's okay to purchase and eat foods that are from far away. Think about health benefits (e.g., eating citrus that is rich with vitamin C during cold and flu season). Does health outweigh the transportation issue?
- Choose your favorite tropical fruit (e.g., mangos!) and write a short essay (2 or 3 paragraphs) about a country where they are grown.

Related Resources

www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer — This is a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) effort to create new economic opportunities by better connecting consumers with local producers. It underscores the importance of understanding where your food comes from and how it gets to your plate.

www.farmtoschool.org/ — Farm to School connects schools (K–12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias; improving student nutrition; providing agriculture, health, and nutrition education opportunities; and supporting local and regional farmers.

www.LocalHarvest.org/ — Local Harvest is a not-for-profit web site designed to help consumers find fresh locally grown foods in neighborhoods throughout the United States, including Farmers' Markets, CSAs, U-Picks, and more.

www.centerforfoodsafety.org/ — The Center for Food Safety is a public interest and environmental advocacy organization that works to address the impacts of our food production system on human health, animal welfare, and the environment.

www.sare.org/ — The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is a U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded initiative that sponsors competitive grants for sustainable agriculture research and education in a regional process nationwide.

www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/ — USDA Database of Community Supported Agriculture Farms and Resources.

www.foodsecurity.org/ — The Community Food Security Coalition's goal is that all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.

www.ohio4h.org/selfdetermined



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