

Why Eat Locally Grown Food? It Benefits All of Us!

By Dr. Monica Dixon

One of the greatest advantages of living in Washington State is the abundant fresh produce, dairy, seafood and animal products available to us throughout each season. Here on the Olympic Peninsula, we're even more fortunate that our temperate climate supports an extended growing season for our farmers, giving us the opportunity to buy much of our food close to home.

Buying food grown within a 100 mile radius of where we live has several advantages, both for us and for our community:

1) Local food has more nutrients because it has a shorter time between the harvest and your table, decreasing the chance of nutrients depleting during transport. Food imported from other states or countries is often older, has traveled many miles to get here and spends a lot of time in distribution centers. Produce picked when ripe has been found to have higher total vitamin C content than when picked before ripening.

2) Local food is full of flavor, because in order to have food arrive in your local grocery store ready to eat, produce must often be picked prior to ripening for the long shipping process, in contrast to local farmers who pick at peak ripeness and often within 24 hours of your purchase. Also, since local farmers aren't distributing their crops across the country, they are more likely to choose varieties for flavor rather than yield.

3) Local food benefits our economy and our families. The wholesale price that farmers get for their products are low, often near the



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cost of production. Local farmers who sell direct to consumers cut out the middleman and get retail price for their food, helping farmers to stay on their land. It also keeps our money here on the peninsula with local businesses.

4) Local food is good for our environment. It decreases the greenhouse gases necessary to get food to us and supports maintaining our farmland and green space in our communities. It also promotes control over our own food supply, as food production and distribution is controlled by those living and working right here.

5) Local foods help promote a safer food supply by decreasing the steps between you and your food source. At each stop in food production, whether its harvesting, washing, shipping or distribution, there are increased opportunities for contamination along the way.

6) Local growers can tell you how your food was grown or raised and what practices the farmer used during production, helping you to be a much more informed consumer.

7) Purchasing and preparing local food with children allows them to learn more about where their food comes from, why it's important to eat a nutrient-dense diet and introduces them to flavors and textures to expand their tastes. Local farms also give children and grandchildren places to go to learn about nature and agriculture.

8) Local food keeps taxes down. According to several studies by the American Farmland Trust, farms contribute more in taxes than they require in services, whereas most development contributes less in taxes than the cost of required services. Cows don't go to school,

tomatoes don't dial 911.

9) Local food is an investment in the future. By supporting local farmers today, you are helping to ensure that there will be farms here tomorrow. That becomes especially important here on the peninsula, where we are geographically isolated from much of the rest of Washington State and it helps increase our self-sufficiency.

10) Probably the most fun reason for choosing locally grown or raised food is the ability to eat in sync with the seasons. Even though we can buy strawberries from Mexico or California in January, they have nowhere near the flavor or nutrition of those coming to us from our local growers in the summer. Our markets burst with peas in the spring, fresh fruit and greens all summer and bountiful squash, pumpkins and pears in the fall. Eating what's in season allows us to experiment with a variety of flavors and reduces our food budget by buying when foods are least expensive.

Maybe you can't get to our local farmer's markets or farm stands regularly, but many of our stores offer local selections so keep an eye out for their signage. And the next time you are out shopping and grab something to throw in your cart, keep in mind the many reasons why choosing something produced closer to home can help your body, your neighbors and your greater community.



About Dr. Monica Dixon

Monica is a psychologist and Registered Dietitian and the President of the Olympic Peninsula Healthy Community Coalition.