

The Importance of Local Foods

By Greg Maslowe

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Why should anyone be concerned with buying local produce? A walk through any grocery store reveals that it is far easier to buy produce grown in California, or even South America.

There are a number of reasons to buy local. One of these is culinary. Most of the fruits and vegetables grown in California were picked unripe to facilitate long distance transportation. In fact, the varieties planted on these farms are usually selected for characteristics having to do with shelf life and ability to hold up to a lot of handling, rather than for things like flavor. Once they get where they are going, produce from the West Coast is often treated with chemical ripening agents to soften them and turn them the right color. All this makes for produce that looks nice, but lacks any real flavor.

There are also serious environmental issues to think critically about when we consider where our food is grown.

It takes a lot of fuel to get food from the West Coast to New England. On average, food travels 1,500 miles before landing on our plate. Almost all of that is on the back of a truck. Transporting food by trucks is so inefficient that there is only a negligible difference in the amount of fuel used to get food to Massachusetts from California versus from Argentina. All this transportation not only requires cheap fuel, it takes a significant toll on the environment.

The United States is the single greatest contributor to global warming in the world. Ironically, this means that our food distribution system could in the near future affect our ability to produce food. Greenhouse gas emissions are changing weather patterns, and as any farmer will tell you, weather is one of the most important variables in farming.

Also, when we buy food grown half way across the continent we are accepting an industrialized version of agriculture.

Our food system is what it is today because small, local farms have for the most part been put out of business by massive farms that operate more like factories than farms. The environmental implications of industrialized agriculture are significant. Vegetables grown in California require massive irrigation systems. Salination (saltiness) is a major bad side effect of irrigation, requiring further irrigation to slow damage to the soil and the aquifers that carry fresh water beneath the soil.

In addition, the huge farms that grow most of our food use synthetic fertilizers. These fertilizers require large amounts of oil in their production, and their use in the fields actually destroys the soil life that makes plant life possible. Thus, farmers have to use more and more fertilizer because their soil is less and less able to grow food without

these inputs. What happens when you put this much soluble fertilizer on your fields? A significant amount of it ends up in our waterways and water systems. Agricultural runoff ultimately deprives water of oxygen, killing aquatic life.

Finally, when we buy produce grown thousands of miles from where we live we are accepting food that does not nourish us. There is growing evidence that vegetables grown under the conditions just described have a higher percentage of simple sugars rather than complex sugars. The impoverished soil means that the vegetables do not contain as many vitamins and minerals.

It is possible to support a new paradigm of food production that seeks to make the world a healthier place. Within ten miles of Newton you can purchase fruits and vegetables, meat and eggs grown without synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Some of this is only available during the New England growing season, but there are farms providing local produce from their root cellars and greenhouses even in the depth of winter. It may not be as convenient as going to the grocery store, but convenience is being paid for by someone—usually that someone is the environment.

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