

VIII. Benefits of Locally Grown Foods

Small farms provide local communities the benefit of scenic and healthy landscapes while contributing to local economic growth. Besides creating picturesque vistas, local agriculture influences all residents. Whether providing open space or healthy vegetables, there are several benefits from supporting local farmers and agricultural landscapes.

A. Nutritional Benefits of Locally Grown Food

The health benefits of consuming fresh fruits and vegetables are numerous. Having a diet high in these food items offer advantages ranging from a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease to the prevention of several types of cancer (CDC 2009). Produce harvested at peak ripeness contains the highest concentration of nutrients; however in the United States most fruits and vegetables are picked before their prime and then are transported long distances to major markets. Produce may appear to ripen during transport, but there is no gain in nutritional value, because nutrients come from the stem and other parts of the growing plant. Sturdiness, uniformity of size and durability for transporting long distances, as opposed to nutritional value, are among the most desirable traits industrial-scale farmers seek in selecting plant stock.

Because a harvested plant loses its vitamin and nutrient content over time, minimizing the distance between farm and the table reduces the loss of nutrients. Produce from farm stands that sell only locally grown foods may have been gathered within a matter of hours, unlike the conventional supermarket produce which is often days to weeks old.

Another human health benefit of locally grown food is the potential of consuming fewer chemicals because small farms tend to be less aggressive when applying fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides than large farms. Minimizing the risk of food-borne illness that can stem from factory farm practices is another potential benefit of eating locally grown foods.

B. Environmental Benefits of Locally Grown Food

Industrial-scale agriculture has become the primary source of fruits, vegetables, and meat products in the United States. These farms, operating much like factories, use vast quantities of pesticides, herbicides, synthetic fertilizers, water and fossil fuels. The irrigation systems that support such agricultural practices often use more water than is recharged, while introducing toxic chemicals into the environment where they may affect drinking water and natural habitats at distances far removed from where they were injected. For example, nitrogen in artificial fertilizers travels down rivers into coastal areas causing algae blooms and damaging coastal fisheries. Because of these serious environmental impacts, industrial agriculture has become a major cause of the degradation of many habitats. It has also been the driving force of the recent local food movement, which focuses on promoting locally grown foods and small-scale farming methods (UCS 2008).

Many smaller farms grow and rotate a large variety of different crops, unlike most very large farms that specialize in monocultures such as growing just corn or soybeans. By interchanging crops, crucial nutrients in soil can be replenished by the different plants during the growing season and during dormant periods. This creates fertile soils that stabilize land reducing erosion and flooding while providing recharge areas for ground water. Many small-scale farms practice organic gardening techniques, whether or not they are certified as an organic farm.

Buying locally grown food may also reduce the amount of non-renewable energy that is required to transport industrial grown fruits and vegetables to market. The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in California reports that the average fresh food item travels 1,500 miles to get to its final destination. The further the distance, the higher the amount of energy required to bring the food to the consumer. Purchasing local produce from a farmers' market or roadside stand not only protects important resource areas, but reduces the consumption of important global resources.