

NORTON FRIENDS & FARMERS MARKET: CONNECTING LOCAL GROWERS TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Keep it local! Six reasons why you should shop at a local farmers market:

1. Enjoy Better Tasting Food. First and foremost, the produce is unbeatably fresh. Forget buying veggies that sat in a refrigerated truck for three days to make their way across the country. No longer will you bring home fruit that traveled across an ocean to reach your kitchen. Typically, produce at the farmers market was harvested at the last possible moment, at peak ripeness. The flavors, textures and colors are noticeably better compared with most supermarket produce.

2. Get More Nutrition for Your Money. Generally speaking, produce that is fresh and local is nutritionally superior to the fruits and veggies in many grocery stores. Many factors affect the nutrient quality of these foods, such as when the crop was harvested, how it was grown, how it was handled and processed, and how long it's been sitting on the supermarket shelf. All of these factors can decrease nutrient quality. Farm-fresh food goes through fewer nutrient-diminishing steps and gets from the earth to your table sooner. This means it is probably richer in antioxidants, vitamins and minerals (thanks to less transport, processing and storage time).

3. Meet Your Farmer. When you're at the market, you can pick up some produce—and pick the farmers' brains, too! The same people who grow the food are usually present to sell their crops at the market, and they have a wealth of knowledge to share. They can tell you how it was grown, how much longer it will be available this season, how to grow the same fruits or vegetables in your garden, and how to store and prepare the food that you buy. All you have to do is ask. You can't afford not to take advantage of one-on-one contact with local farmers.

4. Support local business. When you shop at the farmers market, you're keeping money in your own community, which helps create (and preserve) jobs and makes your hometown more economically stable. Your money goes directly to the farmer—not a middleman—so he can earn a better living. When buying at a grocery store, produce comes from commercial growers all over the country (and overseas). These growers earn about 25 cents of each dollar you spend. Put more of your money into your local farmers' pockets (and in turn, into your local economy) by purchasing fruits and veggies from the market, where farmers keep 95% of what you spend after paying "rent" for their market booth.

5. Eat more vegetables (and fruits). The best reason to visit farmers markets is to continue to raise your awareness of the health of eating fresh fruits and vegetables each day. Studies show that people need about nine daily servings of fruits and vegetables for cancer prevention—far more than the five-a-day often promoted. The more fruit and vegetables are available and accessible, the more everyone in the neighborhood will eat them. Farmers markets and local food are growing trends, and thankfully so! It's hard to think of a healthier craze, and this is one that's likely here to stay.

6. Explore artisan, homemade and handmade products. You might not know that farmers markets usually sell a variety of items in addition to produce. At large and small markets alike, you just may find vendors who sell fresh-cut flowers, seedlings and plants, herbs, handmade soaps, jams and jellies, honey, eggs, meat, cheese and milk, baked goods (muffins, cookies, bread and more), canned salsa and tomato sauces, and much more! Farmers markets sometimes offer unusual or less common varieties of fruits and vegetables, too. It's fun to experiment with produce you've never tasted.

Now that you know why you should be shopping at your local farmers market, here is how to shop at a farmers market:

When coming to the market, you should bring:

- **Cash** (preferably smaller bills). Markets in smaller towns might take checks, and some in cities accept food stamps.

- **Reusable bags or containers** (optional). Depending on what you plan to buy, it's a good idea to bring an extra plastic bag, hard container or baggie to put any wet items in (especially berries, which are fragile and easily squished). Most farmers do provide paper and/or plastic bags for customers, but when you bring your own, you're saving resources and keeping the farmers' costs down.
- **A notepad** (in case you want to write down any tips you pick up while at the market).
- **Food containers** (optional). If you bought eggs, berry pints or quarts, or another item that came in a container from your last visit to the farmers market (or grocery store), bring it back to the vendor. Many farmers who sell eggs, for example, will happily reuse egg cartons from any farm or store brand. This reduces waste and helps them keep their costs down. This is not an expected practice, but it is a nice gesture!

When heading to the market, timing is everything. Arriving early will give you first dibs on the best crops and help you avoid the crowds. Special seasonal items, such as fruit, go fast; if you arrive too late, you might miss out. Arriving later in the day may help you get some good deals from farmers who would rather sell what's left rather than pack it up and haul it home. If you're hoping to negotiate a deal, the end of the day is the best time to score a bargain.

Most farmers will price their fares competitively with the other vendors. You'll likely see similar prices on tomatoes from every farmer, but organic produce might cost more, as will special varieties of foods. When you arrive, scope out the prices and variety at each stand before you buy to ensure that you get the best deal for your money. If several items, such as beans, tomatoes or apples are grouped together at one price, don't be afraid to ask for a smaller amount than is bundled together; most farmers will be happy to accommodate you.

Finally, take your time! Enjoy your experience at the farmers market. Walk slowly, take in the sights and the people, enjoy the free samples, and look carefully and with gratitude at the beautiful foods produced by the farmers in your community.

(Taken from "Greener Virginia, Healthier Environment, and Healthier Lives: A Beginner's Guide to the Farmers Market, The How and Why of Buying from Local Growers")

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