

GROW AND GO LOCAL THIS SUMMER

Contributed by Mandy Enright, MS, RDN, RYT

One of the best parts of summer is all the delicious produce that becomes available this time of year. There are tons of options that allow for more variety in your meals, the cost is lower due to being in season, and produce is a great way to stay hydrated during those hot summer months. Buying fruits and vegetables doesn't have to involve a trip to the grocery store. In fact, there are many ways to obtain fresh produce to enjoy all season long. Let's look at three of the most common options for getting fresh and local produce: Community Gardens, CSA, and Farmers Markets.

Community Gardens

Community gardens are a plot of land gardened collectively by a group of people. Participants share in the maintenance and products of the garden, which typically includes fruits and vegetables or flowers. These can exist in urban, suburban, or rural communities. Most often, residents of a community can design, build, and maintain the space. Not only do community gardens offer a cost-effective approach to growing your own fruits and vegetables, but there is shared labor.

There are many physical and mental health benefits of participating in a community garden, including:

- Access to fresh fruits and vegetables
- Engaging in physical activity
- Promoting stress reduction by spending time outdoors and maintaining the plants
- Beautifying the community by growing gardens in vacant lots or on rooftops
- Bringing communities together and engaging in social activity

Many communities have existing gardens that residents can participate in by paying a fee (which can be waived depending on need). Participants are usually required to put in volunteering time to help maintain the garden. If your town does not have a community garden, consider starting one.

Check your town website, local schools, hospitals, and food banks to locate your nearest community garden. For more info on community gardens, including how to maintain or start a community garden, visit <https://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/community-gardening>

THIS IS BEST FOR: Those who are interested in gardening but either don't have the space, skills, or time to maintain a garden at home.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Unlike a community garden, which is solely maintained by participants and volunteers, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is run through local farms. Farmers offer a certain number of "shares" to the public, which is a membership or subscription to receive boxes of seasonal produce either weekly or biweekly throughout the farming season. There are benefits to both participants and farmers.

Consumer advantage:

- Eat freshly picked fruits and vegetables for maximum nutritional value
- Get exposed to new fruits and vegetables and cooking preparation methods
- Kids may be more likely to eat foods grown at "their" farm
- Develop relationships with farmers to learn about farming practices and how food is grown
- Cost-effective option to eat more fresh, seasonal produce

Farmer advantage:

- Improves cash flow to help with production
- Meet the people eating their food

CSAs are not solely limited to fruits and vegetables. Some may include eggs, bread, meat, cheese, flowers, or other farm items. Often participants are not given a choice with the items they receive in their CSA box, but some CSAs may offer "mix and match" or "market style" options where you can fill your box with what is available that week.





THIS IS BEST FOR: Those who are interested in supporting local agriculture, but either don't have the time or access to shop for local produce, or those who simply want the convenience of having a variety of fresh, local fruits and vegetables provided on a regular basis without having to plan ahead.

To find a CSA in your area, visit <https://www.localharvest.org/> or <https://www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/csas>

Farmers Markets

A farmers market may consist of a farm stand by a single farmer, a retail store, or be set up as a street-fair setting. Because farmers are selling directly to consumers, they can increase profits by cutting out the middleman, and cost is often significantly lower to the consumer by purchasing directly from the farmer. Locally produced items are sold at the market, so availability and options can depend on seasonality, what the farmer chooses to grow, and what is native to the area. Open farmers markets can vary by season or may take place year-round, depending on the location.

Some markets may also sell locally sourced items, including baked goods, eggs, and dairy, and even shelf-stable items, like honey or hot sauce. Flowers, plants, or crafts may also be sold at farm markets. All items sold at the markets have the intention of supporting local agriculture and small businesses.

While not all items sold at a farm market may be labeled organic, many farmers may follow organic farming practices. The great thing about going to a farmers market is you have the opportunity to speak directly with the farmers to learn about how they grow their food and their farming practices.

Many farm markets accept payment from supplemental nutrition programs, including SNAP, WIC, and SFMP, making fresh food more accessible to everyone.

To find a farmers market near you, visit <https://www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets> or <https://www.localharvest.org/farmers-markets/list>

THIS IS BEST FOR: Those who prefer shopping for their own produce and want more flexibility and options. This is also ideal for those who are looking for cost-effective options and prefer locally sourced food items or want to help support local agriculture.

For more information on seasonal produce and recipes, visit <https://fruitsandveggies.org/>.

RECIPE CORNER: STRAWBERRY CHIA JAM

INGREDIENTS:

2 cups strawberries, stems removed and halved
1 TB honey (or maple syrup)
2 TB chia seeds

PREPARATION:

Place strawberries, honey, and chia seeds in a blender or food processor and pulse until a jam consistency is reached. Transfer jam to a saucepan and place on the stove over medium heat. Stir until it begins to bubble. Reduce heat to low and let simmer 10-15 minutes or until jam begins to thicken. Remove from heat, pour into a mason jar, and allow to cool. Store in an airtight container up to 1 week in the fridge. Enjoy on rice cakes, whole grain crackers, pancakes, or stirred into oatmeal or overnight oats. NOTE: Try this recipe with any fresh berry or try different combinations such as strawberry-peach or strawberry-rhubarb. If using frozen berries, make sure to thaw completely. Serves 6.

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION: Calories 34; Fat 1g; Carbs 6g; Fiber 1g; Protein 1g; Sodium 0mg; Calcium 23mg



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