



First Coast Fresh

Growing Options for Local, Seasonal Fruits and Vegetables

By Laura Hampton

Over the past five years, consumers in Northeast Florida have increased the demand for fresh, seasonal produce, as well as locally raised beef, chicken and pork for the health benefits and peace of mind that comes from knowing how their food has been grown.

Luke Watkins, a fifth generation farmer in Palatka, says the concept of sustainable farming has been around for 15 to 20 years in other parts of the country, but is relatively new in Northeast Florida. "People are starting to want to know where their food is coming from," Watkins says.

Historically rural, farms in Palatka and St. Johns County have traditionally grown cabbage and potatoes. Now, Black Hog Farm, and others like it, are growing a larger variety of fruits and vegetables.

Richard Villadoniga, director of Slow Foods First Coast, says the time was right for this diversification of crops. At the same time consumers became interested in buying locally, farmers in North Florida were looking for something that would help them sustain their careers as farmers.

"We have lots of small family farms in our region that are just begging for folks to give them a chance," Villadoniga says.

In addition to supporting farmers in the community, buying locally grown food has numerous health benefits. Research has shown that fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as produce that is frozen quickly after harvesting, retain their nutrients better than canned vegetables. Buying locally ensures you are eating foods at their freshest.

"Every day produce sits around in a cooler or is traveling across the country, it's losing its nutritional value," Watkins says. "Once the produce is picked, it's dead."

Small, family-owned farms use fewer chemicals and pesticides in the growing process. Buying locally does not guarantee food is chemical-free, however, and experts at sustainabletable.org warn, "You have to ask."

That ability to get answers from the grower is an important advantage of buying locally grown and raised food, says Villadoniga. "When the grower is in front of you, it's easier to ask the

important questions. When was this produce picked? How did you grow it? Were pesticides used?"

In addition to the use of chemicals, Jacksonville resident Nikki Gallucci is concerned about the long-term effects of eating produce that has been genetically modified. Since the late 1980s, farmers have genetically engineered crops to introduce desirable traits such as pest protection, herbicide resistance and increased nutritional value, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Gallucci buys her produce from the local farmers market or from a local retail store that serves as a middleman to gather local produce and sell it to consumers. "I just don't want to perpetuate a culture that likes to genetically engineer food," Gallucci says. "It's like a Frankenstein experiment—or a Frankenfruit experiment."

Whatever the reason for Northeast Floridians to favor local, fresh produce, it looks like they are getting support on a national and local level.



Here are a few of the programs that will help you, and your family, maintain a healthy, nutrient-rich diet.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Growing in popularity throughout the region, CSAs provide a way for consumers to buy local, seasonal food directly from the farmer. In CSAs, consumers pay a membership fee in exchange for a "share" of the product the farmer produces. Typically, the share is a box of fruits and vegetables, but some farms include other items such as meat, eggs and honey for an additional fee.

Organic and Natural Farms

Other Organic and Natural Farms in the region do not deliver, but are open for consumers to stop in and purchase produce. If you're in the mood for a real earthy adventure, take the family to a U-pick farm like Riverdale Potato Farm in Hastings, where you can roam through towers of hydroponically grown fruits and vegetables.

For a farm to be classified as organic, the farmer must rely on natural techniques, which means rotating crops, using "green" manure, compost and mulches, and planting proven organic seeds.

Farmers Markets

Farmers markets are springing up throughout the First Coast. Usually held one day a week, the markets are a great location to buy seafood (in season), homemade bread, jams, jellies and honey, in addition to local, seasonal fruits and vegetables.

With locations in Fernandina Beach, downtown Jacksonville, the beaches, St. Augustine and numerous neighborhoods in between, you're sure to find a farmers market near you!

Visit localharvest.org or slowfoodfirstcoast.com for a list of local CSAs, natural farms and farmers markets.



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First Coast Farmers Markets

Beaches Green Market

Saturday, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

beacheslocalfoodnetwork.org

Fernandina Farmers Market

Saturday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

fernandinafarmersmarket.com

**Green Cove Springs Farmers
Market**

Saturday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

greencovespringsfarmersmarket.com

Jacksonville Farmers Market

Open daily, pre-dawn to dusk

jaxfarmersmarket.com

Nocatee Farmers Market

Third Saturday of each month,

10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

nocatee.com

Old City Farmers Market

Saturday, 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

staugustinefm.com

Riverside Arts Market

Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

riversideartsmarket.com

**St. Johns Town Center Farmers
Market**

Friday, 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.

904-236-9966

Community Gardens

Argyle Area Community Garden

7033 Collins Road, Jacksonville

jaxcommunitygarden.org

Arlington Community Garden

7152 Lone Star Road,

Jacksonville

725-8133

arlingtoncommunitygarden.org

**Beaches Organic Community
Garden**

2001 Cherokee Drive,

Neptune Beach

270-0273

beacheslocalfoodnetwork.org

Eastside Community Garden

960 Sparring St., Jacksonville

354-4673

operationnewhope.com

Gardens at Jacksonville Square

2554 Philips Highway,

Jacksonville

738-0518

firststardev.com/thegarden.html

**Laura Street Community
Garden**

1416 Laura St., Jacksonville

sustainablespringfield.net

Lincolnvill Community Garden

399 Riberia St., St. Augustine

citysprout.org

Mandarin Garden Club

2892 Loretto Road, Jacksonville

268-1192

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