

From Field to Fridge: *Things to Consider When Making Food Choices*

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In our global food system, a typical carrot has to travel over 1,800 miles to reach your dinner table. Consumers have questions about their food—where was it grown, how was it grown, how far did it have to travel to get to the supermarket? Phrases like “sustainable” and “local” have become more common when describing agricultural food systems. While these concepts may have some overlapping philosophies, there are some differences that need to be identified in order for the consumer to make an informed choice.

Local Agriculture

The concept of “local” agriculture is simple—local foods are grown as close to home as possible. The benefits of buying local include:

- Significantly reducing the “food miles” a food item has to travel to get to your home, and subsequently the energy input required for transportation
- Supporting local farmers and rural communities
- Allowing for a direct connection with the food source

Local food is typically available at farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, but can also be found at supermarkets and large grocery chains. Keep in mind, however, that just because it is local does not necessarily mean that is sustainable or organic.



Organic Agriculture

In terms of food, “organic” simply means that the product or its ingredients were produced without routine inputs of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. The benefits of organic agriculture include:

- Reducing inputs of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides into the environment
- Reducing potential exposure to fertilizers and pesticides for farmers and farm workers
- Reducing potential for consumer exposure to residues in or on food

Organic food is available just about everywhere now, from farmers’ markets to large grocery retailers. Organic certification and labeling is regulated the US Department of Agriculture. It should be noted that an organic label does not necessarily indicate that a product is healthier or safer. Furthermore, just because it’s organic does not necessarily mean that is local or sustainable, and “food miles” may be an issue.

Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainable agriculture combines the concepts of organic production and buying local into a food system philosophy that goes “beyond organic”. Sustainable agriculture is a way of growing food that is healthy, does not harm the environment, respects workers, is humane to animals, provides a fair wage to the farmer, and supports farming communities. Characteristics of this type of agriculture include:

- Conservation and preservation of the land and natural resources
- Biodiversity of crops and animal welfare
- Economically viable and socially just

Unlike organic agriculture, sustainable agriculture is not currently regulated by any government agency—it is more a way of life. There are no laws governing a sustainable label and each individual farmer can have their own interpretation of the sustainable philosophy. Many of the terms associated with sustainable agriculture, such as “cage free” or “natural” have no clear or legal definitions and can lead to food being marketed as sustainable when it may not be. Both organic production and buying local are components of a sustainable food system.



The best way to verify the origin and methods of production behind a food item is to ask questions. Local and sustainable agriculture, while not government regulated, allow you to develop a personal relationship with the farmer which provides insight into their farming philosophies and practices. Organic agriculture does not always afford the opportunity to develop the same kind of personal relationships, but the certification and regulation of organics by the USDA allows the consumer some confidence that organic production guidelines are followed.

For more information, please visit: www.usda.gov, www.sustainabletable.org, www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/Concept