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| Is local better?  **Most would say it is, but home-grown food isn’t necessarily healthier, cheaper or greener** By KELLY SHIERS Staff Reporter | SPECIAL REPORT Sun. Oct 11 - 4:46 AM   |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | Dill’s Farm Market on the Herring Cove Road in Halifax overflows with fresh, local fruits and vegetables. (Photos by ERIC WYNNE / Staff)  Locavores love farm markets because they can buy vegetables on Saturday that were picked on Friday. (ERIC WYNNE / Staff) | |  |   REBECCA GREEN juggles a lot on her plate. And as much as she can, she fills that plate with local ingredients.  Sure, you can spot the Mount Saint Vincent University professor at her neighbourhood grocery store, stocking up on soybean milk and the kind of processed foods that make preparing supper a little more convenient.  But this dietitian and food researcher says it’s a priority for her to buy local.  "In some of our fruits, nutrients shunt to the outer portions as they ripen, so if you’re picking things before they’re ripe so you can transport them across the country, they’re not going to have all the nutrients of something that’s vine-ripe and picked fresh from the vine."  While not true of every food, studies show fresh-picked tomatoes and spinach, for example, are more nutrient-dense with vitamin C and antioxidants, she said.  Add that, then, to the list of reasons to buy local.  In the battle for the food-buying dollar, the growing buy-local movement appeals to the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of consumers.  You may have to forgo the convenience of picking up vacuum cleaner bags and microwaveable, ready-to-eat lunches while shopping at a local farmers market.  And true believers have to be willing to serve with the seasons or tackle the traditional skills of pickling, freezing and preserving.  But enthusiasts — locavores, as they’re known — have no trouble building the case for buying local. Close the distance between farm and table and you feed local farmers, businesses and the economy. You dish up food that’s tastier and better for you. And you’re doing something good for the environment.  But are you?  It’s true that Annapolis Valley tomatoes may be tastier. You probably can’t get any fresher beans than the ones picked Friday and sold Saturday at the local farmers markets. And locally made sausage, with little fat and no fillers, may have you coming back for seconds — and thirds.  Nova Scotia Agricultural College professor Lloyd Mapplebeck says there are reasons for that.  Farmers in mid-size and smaller operations have found a niche growing more flavourful varieties of fruits and veggies for the local market rather than producing the varieties hardy enough to withstand long-distance shipping. Or they’ve opted to concentrate on quality over quantity, exploring ways to add value and make their products unique, he says.  But even those who promote the buy-local movement say the assumption that local food is always better — more nutritious, more affordable, safer and more environmentally responsible — is not necessarily so. And given the limitations of our growing season, it’s not always practical.  "Some people think you buy only local. That’s ridiculous," says Mr. Mapplebeck, who is also president of the Truro Farmers’ Market, the third-largest of the 33 farmers markets in Nova Scotia.  There’s no doubt buying local helps local farmers and economies by keeping dollars in the local area, he says. But any widespread buy local-only movement would hurt our local farmers who rely on exports, he says.  Mr. Mapplebeck, who teaches direct marketing opportunities to students as part of a course at the Bible Hill college, says the reasons people buy local are diverse. But recent food scares have added to the buy-local push.  "A couple of years ago, when we had the (E. coli-contaminated) spinach scare in the U.S., it just knocked the spinach market. It just disappeared, but farmers markets’ spinach farmers, they sold more spinach. People wouldn’t buy spinach at a chain store, but they would buy from Joe Smith, who they’ve been buying vegetables from for 15 years. They trust Joe."  Ms. Green says Mount Saint Vincent has studied the availability and affordability of local foods. While the research shows consumers will have the most luck finding local produce and some meats in their grocery aisles, the results on affordability are not yet ready to be released, she says.  But Mr. Mapplebeck says local products aren’t always cheaper than what’s on offer at the big grocery stores. He suggests frugal consumers shop around and look for in-season produce when a harvest is well underway rather than when produce is first on the shelves.  "But you can’t just measure price in terms of cents or dollars per pound," he says. "One of our vegetable vendors produces high-quality snap beans and always sells out. You pay a little more for them at the market than you would at a store, but if you purchase ones (at a supermarket), they could be hard, seedy, there are rotten ones. You end up with wastage, whereas these beans are 100 per cent edible."  Buying local does allow consumers to reward environmental practices they favour. But claims that buying local is inherently the more eco-friendly choice, simply because food that doesn’t travel far is less polluting than food shipped thousands of kilometres, aren’t true, says Peter Tyedmers, a Dalhousie University professor who researches the environmental impacts of food systems.  "People like to say buying local has lower environmental impacts because it seems objective, even though it may be completely unsubstantiated," says Mr. Tyedmers.  When it comes to the greenhouse gas emissions, transporting food is one part of the environmental equation. But he says it can be easily outweighed by other factors, such as how much electricity is used to produce and process the crop and whether that electricity comes from coal or wind, for example.  And the emissions and other environmental impacts that come from having half-ton trucks running from farm to market and consumers jumping into their vehicles to visit all the little markets should also factor into the equation, he said.  Mr. Tyedmers says choosing local foods is about choosing priorities and sometimes making trade-offs.  "We like to connect around food . . . and we extend that to connecting with people who supply our food. This is all really good, but let’s be open to the fact it may come at a price."  Jamey Coughlin, who works with the provincial Agriculture Department and the government’s Select Nova Scotia program ( [www.selectnovascotia.ca](http://www.selectnovascotia.ca/)), says there is no one reason, as there is no one consumer, to choose local food.  "I look at it as a tool rather than an end to itself," he says. "I’m looking to buy food, but by buying local I can get really unique fruits and vegetables or I am keeping local farms farming, and that’s really important to me."  But he says it often comes down to relationships.  "When you’re talking local versus global, there aren’t two categories — one good, one bad, one safe, one not safe. But the op­portunity to ask questions, or visit a farm or talk to a farmer, that’s part of why people are at­tracted  to it."  ([kshiers@herald.ca](mailto:kshiers@herald.ca)) |  |
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