

Local Food

Taste the Difference

Overview

This activity links the work of harvesting and packing produce with concepts about local marketing and its consequences for farmers and consumers. Many people in today's society are far removed in both space and time from the source of their food. This distancing of people from their food source has led to an increase in certain consumer choices and a decrease in others. We may be able to buy many new types of exotic fruit or variations of breakfast cereals in super markets, but we are offered fewer in-season locally grown agricultural products.

The relative absence of local fresh foods has its consequences, one of which is often a negative impact on the flavor of the foods we eat. This activity is designed to demonstrate that where food is grown and its freshness has an influence on the taste of food. People can usually taste real differences between produce from a local farm and produce grown far away and shipped to a supermarket. Local fresh foods are often available through farmers' markets and community supported agriculture (CSA), arrangements. The following reference resources are provided to improve your familiarity with the topic.

Resource References

Where does food come from? Food Routes Network

<http://foodroutes.org/whycare2.jsp>

Five reasons for buying locally grown products. Community Alliance with Family Farms

<http://caff.org/programs/buylocal.shtml#whyblg>

Plant Parts. Missouri Botanical Garden

<http://www.mbgnet.net/bioplants/parts.html>

What is a Certified Farmers Market? California Federation of Certified Farmer's Market

<http://www.cafarmersmarkets.com/about/>

Farmers Market Facts. Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/facts.htm>

Farmers' Markets, Family Farms, and Other Sources of Sustainably Grown Food In Your Area. Local Harvest

<http://www.localharvest.org>

Local Food

Taste the Difference

Introduction

This activity is intended to introduce students to a small farm or garden that produces and sells a number of different crops locally through a CSA, farmers' market or similar marketing strategy. They will see how a diversity of vegetables and fruits are grown and harvested for market. They will also learn what locally grown produce tastes like and compare its taste to produce purchased at a supermarket.

Many of the visiting students may not have been to a farm for many years, if ever. Most everything the students see will be new so it is important to give them sufficient time to explore the farm, while providing them the opportunity to harvest produce that is in season.

Because many consumers today buy their produce at supermarkets and big box stores most people do not know what local or seasonal produce might look or taste like. Many consumers in the US can buy most fruits and vegetables every week of the year. Consequently, they do not know when an apple, a tomato or other produce is in season and being grown in their own geographic region. They also do not realize that freshly harvested produce usually tastes different than produce transported long distances. During this activity, students will have the opportunity to compare the taste of produce that is locally grown with that which has been grown elsewhere and shipped long distances. After their visit to the farm, students will be encouraged to locate sources of local fresh foods in their home communities. They may discover that local farms and gardens can grow fresher, tastier and healthier produce than is typically found in large supermarkets.

To Lead This Activity You Need to Know

Facilitators of this activity need to have the following basic understandings in order to effectively lead students through this activity:

- Names of all the crops used in the activity and how they are grown
- How to harvest the crops
- What plant parts are eaten (eg. roots, stems, fruits, flowers)

Key Concepts

- Fresh taste
- Harvesting
- Plant parts: stems, leaves, roots, fruits, flowers/flower buds
- Direct Marketing; Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), local farmers' market, roadside stands, u-pick operations

Objectives

- Learn about local and direct marketing, particularly CSA and farmers' market
- Learn how to harvest vegetables for a CSA basket or local market
- Identify plant parts
- Compare the taste of store bought and freshly harvested vegetables

Materials

- A farm with a diversity of harvestable vegetables and fruits
- Boxes or baskets for harvesting – 1 for each group of 5-6 students
- Digging forks, knives, or other tools for harvesting produce
- Place to wash vegetables
- Samples of commercially shipped crops from a supermarket that are the same crops as some of those that the students will pick
- Paper and marker for tallying student votes

Activity (45-50 minutes)

Farm Exploration and Harvesting (20-30 minutes)

1. After welcoming the students to the farm and describing how your farm works, explain that on today's visit they are going to help harvest and test the taste of the produce. Walk the students through the field and show them the crops being grown. If possible, show the crops in their different growth stages, from seedling to full maturity. Show them how to harvest more than one vegetable or fruit from the farm. Possibly include carrots, green beans, herbs, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, corn and fruit such as apples, plums, and strawberries.
2. Bring students to a mature crop location and show the distinctions of what make that crop ready for harvesting, contrasting it with the immature and/or over-mature plantings or individuals.
3. Break the students into groups of 5-6 and pass out harvesting equipment. Demonstrate how to select and harvest the crop(s). Supervise the students in doing these tasks, making sure they understand the quantity and quality you want. Ideally, this will be done in conjunction with the farm's own schedule so that the students can be acknowledged for the contribution they actually make to the task of harvesting.
4. Once back in the packing area, briefly demonstrate the steps involved in cleaning, grading, and sorting the crop. Let the students participate in these steps and supervise them.
5. Once they are finished, ask the group what they learned from looking at the various crops and the harvesting activities. Were they surprised by how a plant grew or by what part of the plant is eaten? Was it difficult, fun? Would any of them like to have their own garden so they grow, harvest and eat fresh food?

Taste Comparisons (15-20 minutes)

For this activity, we recommend using apples, carrots, tomatoes, or corn, depending on the growing season. These crops are easier to handle and divide into tasting pieces.

1. For a “blind-test”, it is important to prepare and label (e.g., “Source A” and “Source B”) the fruit or vegetable pieces so that the students can taste the samples without recognizing which source the produce came from.
2. Have them choose the produce (Source A or Source B) they prefer most, based upon flavor and other quality characteristics that they think are important. Tally the students’ preferences and share the results with the group.
3. Having them taste their own harvested produce is very important so they experience eating the food they themselves picked. If you have limited time however, you can also prepare a batch before the students arrive.
4. Ask the students why the group preferred Source A or B. Ask them why the produce might come to taste differently? How does freshness affect taste? How long do they think it usually takes produce to get from the farm to the retail outlet where they or someone in their family buys it?

Discussion and Reflection (10-15)

Encourage students to investigate where they can purchase fresh, locally grown produce. Ask the students to find out where there might be a CSA, farmers’ markets, roadside stand or U-Pick operation in their community. Ask them if they know people who garden in their yards or in community gardens where they live. If possible, take students to a local farmers’ market or visit a nearby community garden or diversified farm that markets directly in the area. Have the students make a list or create a poster with the places they can find affordable fresh produce in their neighborhood.

Have students choose and locate one fresh local fruit and one fresh local vegetable. Have students retrieve the same kinds of fruits and vegetables from a store. Have students bring the produce to class and do a taste test to compare the flavor of the local and store bought produce.

To find out where local farms and farmers’ markets are in your area you can check:

<http://www.cafarmersmarkets.com/search/>
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets>
<http://www.localharvest.org>