

EXTENSION CONNECTION – Shopping at Farmers’ Markets

By: Paulelda Gilbert, ISU Extension Nutrition & Health Specialist

Q. I would like to shop at the Farmers Market but have not done this before. What do I need to know? Is this a good choice for fresh produce?

A. Shopping at a Farmers' Market can be a very pleasant and tasty way to enjoy fresh produce. It connects you to the community, the seasons, and to local farmers. With the current dietary recommendation to enjoy four and half cups daily of a combination of Fruits and Vegetables for better health, farmers' markets provide many tasty and colorful choices.

In most parts of the world, the local market is the heartbeat of the community. In Iowa, it's a way to support local farms, as well as to enjoy the freshest lettuce and spinach, strawberries, tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables of the season. It's refreshing to know that you are buying food directly from the producer of that product. The interaction between you and the grower adds value to the shopping experience.

Another good reason to enjoy the weekly Farmers' Markets is to eat and cook 'seasonally'. You begin to appreciate the seasons while shopping fresh.

Use the market as a start for planning meals and plan your next meal around the fresh produce you find.

Hints and tips for shopping at a farmers' market.

To enhance your visit to the Market:

1. Take your time and have fun browsing. Stroll all the stands to see what's available before making your decision.
2. Go early. You'll find the best selection then.
3. Ask questions. If you don't know what a food item is, just ask. You may discover a delightful addition to your summer meals. Talk to the producer. Ask how to prepare and cook it. Get valuable information on even the most common fruits and vegetables.
4. Bring cash. It is a convenient method of purchase. Most Farmers' Markets have vendors who accept food coupons from the WIC (Women Infants and Children) program. Eligible families can receive coupons to buy produce at farmers markets to help supplement meals, which benefits the local farmers as well. Contact WIC to see if you qualify. If you are a senior citizen, you may also qualify for produce coupons. Check with the Area Agency on Aging for coupons for eligible senior citizens.
5. Bring your own containers - baskets, bags, boxes. Often vendors have bags and boxes, but it's helpful to bring your own. You can feel good about recycling and buying local at the same time.
6. Bring a cooler, especially in hot weather. Make sure to have coolers with ice packs in your car or take the produce straight home to keep it fresh and at its peak.
7. Dress comfortably. Wear walking shoes and come prepared to shop, rain or shine.
8. Experiment. Don't be afraid to try something new! You may discover a new favorite food to make your summer even richer and sweeter.
9. Involve your children. Give them a few dollars and let them buy whatever produce they want to eat. It's a good way to encourage them to eat more fruits and vegetables.
10. Introduce a friend to the Farmers' Market. Cook a meal with foods at the farmers market, share it with friends. Then say, "This is from the Farmers' Market - go shop there!"

We hear a lot of talk about supporting family farms - here's one way to do that. It may be that the Farmers Market is the best hope for the family farm, especially as we begin to realize the extreme importance of having a food source close to home. For freshness, peak flavor, interesting varieties, taste and color, shop at your local Farmers' Markets.

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 576-2119 or e-mail pgilbert@iastate.edu, with your nutrition and health questions. You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804.