

How to Grow

A Local Food System

G A I L G O L D B E R G E R



What a Local Food System Comprises

A food system is the path food takes from production to consumption through disposal. Within the system, people buy food and money is exchanged. The visible parts of the path are farms and markets, but economic exchanges occur at every step, and include processors, transporters, marketers, restaurateurs and waste disposers. A local food system is one in which all the steps on the path occur within a

radius of 100 to 250 miles.

Why They Are Important

In the last century, Illinois shifted away from local food production. Though ranking sixth in the nation in the value of agricultural products sold—corn and soybeans shipped elsewhere or made into non-food products—less than 10 percent of Illinois farms produce food for Illinoisans.

This is not only an edible loss, but an economic one as well. Because 90 percent of food consumed here is produced elsewhere, our dollars support jobs and economies out of state. According to the USDA, \$46 billion of our \$48 billion dollars spent on food flows out of the state.

Furthermore, the food most often purchased here has traveled many miles over days and weeks, compromising its freshness, adding to its costs and increasing its environmental footprint in spent fuel and emissions exhaust.

There is a movement underway to encourage sustainable local food systems that meet present needs without compromising future needs. Sustainable farming, for example, uses fewer chemicals and pesticides, which improves soil and water quality and reduces the toxins present in food. Roof gardens and urban plots reduce heat islands. Turning food waste into compost enriches soil for future use and diverts food waste from landfills that are unsightly, smelly and toxic.



Local Food Systems Now

This century has seen shifts back to local food production, and those efforts are growing. From

Lincoln Park to Lisle, from Libertyville to Tinley Park, farmers' markets offering food from Illinois farms or farms in nearby states such as Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan have multiplied in the last decade.

Also popular are community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms that supply produce to surrounding areas, sometimes year-round, in boxes or shares delivered to pick-up points throughout the metropolitan area. CSAs have become so popular that demand has outstripped supply.

Even though more farms in surrounding counties are growing fruits and vegetables and converting to organic practices, land for farming is still scarce and expensive, with pressure from developers to snap up remaining land for a growing population.



Graphics provided by Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (2012)

and sustainability of our food systems.

Policies and Programs Encourage Local Food Systems

To remedy this collision of need and demand, and the loss of dollars and jobs for Illinois, several organizations and the government have passed laws, forged policies and started programs to influence the future effectiveness

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) made promotion of sustainable local food one of the 12 regional priority areas in its GO TO 2040 comprehensive plan (CMAP.Illinois.gov/2040/local-food-systems). Jason Navota, senior planner at CMAP, says, "The potential untapped demand in the state for locally grown food in the Chicago metropolitan area alone is \$2.5 billion, and \$10 billion statewide. Because money spent locally creates a multiplier effect of 1.4 to 2.6, \$10 billion in unmet local demand could amount to \$14 to \$26 billion in increased revenues for Illinois."

CMAP is currently working with Lake County, Kane County and the city of Chicago to sustain and grow local food systems through its Local Technical Assistance program (CMAP.Illinois.gov/lta).

What Consumers Can Do

Purchase locally grown food, patronize restaurants and markets that buy from local farms, support legislation that encourages local food systems. Urge your government representatives to preserve farmland and convert vacant municipal lots to community gardens. Go to farmers' markets, sign up for CSAs and start gardens in your yards, on your decks or porches. Learn about composting.



For a comprehensive list of the 90 farmers' markets in our area, visit TheLocalBeet.com and IllinoisWhereFreshIs.com.

Gail Goldberger is a Chicago-based writer whose work spans ecology, nature, the environment, health and human services. After researching and writing this article, she tries to buy as much as possible at the farmers' market from Illinois farms.

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