

Finding Great Sources of Local, Organic Vegetables and Fruit

It's Spring. If you grow your own produce, you may have already begun your planning process for this growing season. If you don't have the time or inclination to create and maintain a garden, if you don't have the real estate to grow a garden in your back yard, or if you are unhappy with the availability or quality of fresh, organic vegetables and fruit at your local grocery store, you do have other options available to you.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enables consumers to buy seasonal food directly from a local farmer or cooperative of local farmers. CSAs are not limited to vegetables, fruit, herbs, and flowers, however, that is the focus of this article. Local farmers offer shares, memberships, or subscriptions to interested consumers for a price. In return, the consumers receive a box of seasonal food at established intervals throughout the growing season, often every week or every other week. Some CSAs require some or all of the fee up front, which provides the farmers with the capital that they need to invest in their crops. Most of the time, this fee is credited to the consumer's account to be used to purchase the food when it is harvested. There are some CSAs, however, that charge a membership fee that is not later applied toward food purchases. Food can be picked up at the farm or more often, is dropped off at several predetermined locations where consumers can go to the one closest to them to pick up their parcel. Most CSAs provide a standard variety of their harvest to all subscribers, although some do permit the subscriber, to differing degrees, to choose what produce they want. One element of CSA that is important for consumers to understand, is that unforeseen circumstances including bad weather, can affect the harvest for which they've already paid. Doing adequate research and selecting a well established CSA with a good track record minimizes, but does not eliminate, this risk. LocalHarvest.org can be very helpful in locating CSAs near you.

Farmers' markets can often be found in relatively convenient locations at predetermined days and times of the week during the growing season. There is often a mix of farmers at the market, and hopefully there will be at least one organic farmer. These transient markets can often be found in large parking lots of municipal buildings or churches. LocalHarvest.org can also be used to locate farmers' markets in your area. You may have to follow up with the market contact if you want to determine ahead of time if organic farmers will be present.

Community garden plots are segments of land gardened collectively by a group of people. Subplots of this land can be rented and used to create a garden for personal use. In the South Hills of Pittsburgh, community gardens exist in areas such as Mt. Lebanon and Upper St. Clair. An internet search can reveal others. One downside to this approach is the inability to know exactly what the gardeners before you used on their crops or what your garden plot neighbors will be doing. Did previous plot renters use pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals, residues of which may remain in the soil? Will current plot neighbors be spraying chemicals on their plants that can be carried by the wind and insects onto your plants?

Container gardens are another option and can flourish on decks, windowsills, and even kitchen counters if enough light exists and if the right plants are chosen for the containers. Carrots, radishes, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, eggplants, squash, beans, and herbs are just some of the plants that can thrive in pots. Plants that have the same sunlight and water requirements can

even be grouped together in the same pot if it is large enough. Make sure your containers are adequate in size and that they have holes in the bottom to enable the drainage of excess water. Avoid dark colored containers as they will absorb more heat than light colored pots and could damage your plants' roots. Larger plants like tomatoes and eggplants should each have a five gallon container. Whenever possible, choose plants that are developed for growing in small spaces. They may be described as bush, compact, or space saver. Plants that grow up more than out, such as pole beans, are also good choices. They require a container at least 8 inches deep. The vines will need something to grab onto and can reach distances of 8 feet or higher. For herbs, use pots that are at least 6 inches in diameter with an 8-inch soil depth. If you are growing them inside, find a sunny location for them as they do best with 14 to 16 hours of sunlight each day. Select an organic potting soil that is made for vegetables and fruit. Plants in containers will require watering more frequently than the same plants in the ground and as they mature, they will require more water. Check your containers daily and don't wait until your plants are wilting to water them. Fertilization is important but fertilizing too little is better than too much.

Due to time constraints, you may need to rely on some phenomenal grocery stores like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. If there isn't a grocery store near you that carries high quality, organic produce, you may want to consider car pooling to the store nearest you or taking turns shopping for yourself and a group of friends.

Part of the fun of adopting a plant-based lifestyle is experimenting with new foods, tastes, and textures. Don't let your sense of adventure stop at the conventional grocery store. Use this time during the growing season to buy a fruit or vegetable that you've never tried before as often as you can. Ask the merchant how to prepare and cook it or research it on the Internet. I hope you enjoy this season as much as I do.

Sources:

www.gardening.about.com, Container Vegetable Gardening: Ideas for Growing Vegetables in Small Spaces and Growing Vegetables in Containers both by Marie Iannotti

www.gardening-guides.com/herbs/indoor-herb-gardens.php

www.LocalHarvest.org