

LIFESTYLES WITH SYLVIA



Dear Friends,

Welcome back! In case you haven't noticed, my previous columns have all been built on a simple foundation for weight loss success: eat less, choose wisely and move more. That's why this month's column is all about farmers' markets, the best place to find the healthiest, "real" foods in reasonable portions while staying active!

I know what you're thinking: what makes a farmers' market so much better than a grocery store? Simply put, farmer's markets shorten the distance between you and your food. This improves your diet by cutting out processed and packaged foods and added sugar, fat and preservatives in favor of raw, whole ingredients. Plus, since produce sold at farmers' markets doesn't need to stand up to long distance shipping, you'll be able to choose from better tasting varieties of fruits and vegetables that wouldn't last the trip from farm to table, which is typically upwards of 1,500 miles.

As if that weren't reason enough to shop at farmers' markets, when we buy fresh food locally we support area farmers, encourage diversity of available foods, preempt polluting long-distance transport and recycle money back into our own community.

Shopping the market

So now that you understand the value of farmers' markets, let's take a closer look at how to navigate them.

Successful farmers' market shopping requires a different protocol than supermarket shopping, so here are some tips to help you maximize your experience and take full advantage of all that a farmers' market has to offer:

Be prepared

Remember, a farmers market is no Stop & Shop, so before you head off to the market, make sure you've got the cash you'll need (preferably in small bills) and take your own canvas bags, net bags or baskets. As you load up on purchases, make sure to shift the heavy items to the bottom to avoid squashed berries and flattened tomatoes. Personally, I like to shop with several canvas bags so there's never too much in any one.

Also, plan to go straight home after shopping so you can put away your groceries. If you can't go home right away, bring a cooler for the more perishable items.

Forget your shopping list

Shopping list? Forget about it! Since local farmers sell unusual and heirloom produce varieties, not to mention food too fragile to ship, you're likely to discover fruits and vegetables you never knew existed. If you're shopping for specific meals you want to prepare in the next few days, try to be flexible. It's wiser to plan menus once you get to the market and see what's best.

Make the rounds before you choose anything

Always eye before you buy. As a result, you'll be able to see who has what and at what price and quality. Feel free to taste and compare different vendors' peaches or melons. Then you'll be able to make your selections knowing you won't find tastier or cheaper fruit at another stand.

Try not to over buy

One of the main reasons to shop at a farmers' market is benefit from fresh food, but if your food sits in the refrigerator for days, it won't be fresh any longer. If you buy some items that need to be eaten in the next few days, buy other less perishable foods that will last through the end of the week or until your next trip to the market.

Take your children with you

Believe it or not, taking your kids to the farmers' market can be a fun and educational experience. These days, too many children have no idea where food comes from or how it looks in its unprocessed state, and seeing zucchini with blossoms or carrots with tops will give them an idea of how vegetables grow. Plus, kids are more likely to eat their vegetables if they help pick them out.

For the best selection and quality, shop early

When it comes to farmers' markets, the phrase "first come, first served" couldn't be truer. Growers often bring just a few pounds of goods, and naturally the choice produce goes first. Additionally, on warm days the quality of unrefrigerated fruits and vegetables can decline from morning to afternoon. That said, if it's a good price you're after, shop later in the sales day when farmers are more likely to make you a deal.

Don't insist on organic

If you usually buy organic, don't be turned off if your favorite farm stand isn't certified. Many small farms don't get certified organic—even though they don't spray or use pesticides—because the certification process is just too expensive. Instead of "certified organic," some growers say their food is "pesticide free" or "no spray." Not sure how a farmer grows his or her crops? Just ask!

Take time to chat with the farmers

Farmers' markets are more than just markets—they're communities, and building relationships is all part of the fun. Take the time to make connections and you'll soon become a wiser and happier shopper and maybe even walk away with the occasional "special customer" treat.

Finding Local Produce

Ready to shop the farmers' market? Here are some ways to get started:

- **National Resources Defense Council:** find out what's ripe by state and season at www.NRDC.org/health/foodmiles
- **Local Harvest:** tap into free directories of farmers' markets and community supported agriculture sources at www.LocalHarvest.org
- **Robyn Van En Center's Community Supported Agriculture:** locate community-supported agriculture sites at www.CSACenter.org
- **Veggie Trader:** swap, share and sell excess garden crops with neighbors at www.VeggieTrader.com

Learn more at SRC Nutritional Counseling Support Classes

This month we will meet on **Tuesday Aug 11 at 6:30 pm** and **Wednesday, August 12 at 10:30 am**. Come prepared to swap some low cal, easy to prepare fresh food recipes made with the local produce purchased at your favorite farmers' market. If you have any specific questions, feel free to email them to me at SylviaE9@aol.com and I will answer them in class.

Until next time,

Sylvia

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