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FOOD/HEALTH

Apples, pumpkins and squash — time to switch our local food radar to autumn October 5th, 2009

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Green Right Now

Eating locally can be a healthier, wiser way to go — fresher food is more nutrient rich. But shopping for local produce means we must learn to take control of our menu, work with what's in season and let go of what's heading out.



Now that it's fall, we have to say goodbye to berries, hello to pumpkins, and dig through our cookbooks for that squash soup recipe.

Farmers insist we've still got plenty of choices — especially if we froze or canned summer fruits and veggies — but the simple truth is where we live, the soil, the sun-rain equation, the habits of local growers and the climate all combine to winnow what's fresh at any given time.

And then, it's not always crystal clear what's local, what's regional, and what's been shipped in. The US is teeming with apples at the moment, mostly from Washington, New York

and other northern states. But a few farmers are still able to bring raspberries and blueberries to their stalls at the farmers market. This may cause some head scratching in New Hampshire, where rival-farmers have been heard to grumble that some of the berries have been trucked in from large greenhouses in New Jersey where crops are grown year round. But then there are a few hearty blackberries clinging to the bushes in New England. So who's to say? Take Texas. The heat zapped most tomatoes long ago, way back in July. Or did it? The late summer weather's been milder, and there are tented tomatoes and hot houses. Some of those local tomatoes may be genuine.

But don't get discouraged. There are plenty of ways to sniff out the freshest food, and fill your tote with mostly produce:

- As always, your local farmer's market is a good guide. Look at what local vendors are selling and you'll spot the trends. Better yet, ask where things came from. If you don't get a ready answer, you may want to plum more amenable territory. Something missing from the market? Ask. Maybe the black-eyed peas just aren't in from the fields yet.
- Check with your local County Extension Service. They should be able to tell you when pecans are typically harvested, or whether bell peppers are

still on the vine or if there's late sweet corn in the area.

- Many groceries help you harmonize with local growers by clearly labeling what's local, and what's organic. Local tends to trump organic, if you're thinking about nutrients and your carbon imprint and faced with that choice. Some veggies and fruits, in fact, don't need much in the way of chemicals to do just fine. Zucchini thrives in the right soil; many farmers can honestly tell you they were grown au naturel.
- [Local Harvest.org](http://LocalHarvest.org) can help you sort out the chaff from the wheat, so to speak. Type in your zip code and they'll tell you what local farmers are raising. You can also find Community Supported Agriculture or CSA farms to join, which will supply you with a selection of plant food, fresh from the field, and may offer eggs and meats too.

Eating locally means adapting your menu and meal expectations to what's available at the moment: CSA's and CSF's, for example, can only supply you what they grow or catch. If blight hits the tomatoes or bad weather keeps boats at anchor then you've got to take what you're offered. Being understanding may mean that your favorite Golden Delicious apples might not size up but the pear crop is plentiful.

Some groups help by offering recipes for local foods. [Glynwood Farm](#), a working farm and farm advocacy center, in New York's Hudson Valley has an extensive recipe list on their web site. Check out their [Butternut Squash and Pear Soup recipe](#).

Glynwood reasons that you should look at options when deciding whether to buy local or mass-produced food: "Higher quality local products may well cost more than conventional products, but you may find it possible use them if you design more cost effective meals. There is a reason the free range chickens cost more than those raised in confinement – and once you have tasted the difference you will want to serve the best." And an option to chicken breasts if the budget is tight: chicken casserole.