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# Make a Difference

By Karen Bishop  
District Manager, Whidbey Island Conservation District

### A HEALTHY HABIT FOR SUMMER – AND FOR ALL SEASONS: WHY BUY LOCAL ON WHIDBEY

Are you ready to capture the opportunity this growing season to fill your tummies and your refrigerator with fresh, local produce? Whidbey Island farmers are in full production this growing season – harvesting fresh and delicious berries, fruits, and vegetables that will hopefully find their way to your picnic basket or dinner table. Summer on Whidbey Island is a delight for everyone who is fortunate to live and recreate here. Whether we are working or playing – we all have the need to fill our bodies with nutritious food. Lucky for all of us, our local farmers have near perfect conditions to grow a plentiful supply of nutritious, healthy food right in our backyard. Here are some good reasons to consider sourcing local as your first option:

Did you know your investment in buying from your local farmer during the growing season is one of the best ways to preserve farms, these beautiful landscapes and scenic vistas we have here on Whidbey Island? Even though the island feels quite rural with farms of varying sizes speckling the landscape, a very small percentage of the food consumed on the island is actually grown here. We as consumers have the power to change that pattern, particularly at a time when our farmers are figuring out how to extend the growing season and, as a result, are producing a wider variety of locally grown products. In recent years, more “seasonal high tunnels” – which you might call large greenhouses – can be seen in the landscape. These structures increase the heat units, captured by the sun’s rays, available for plant growth and extend the growing season. It used to be rare to find locally grown greens abundant in April and peppers in October, but the ability to extend the growing season is increasing the consumer’s ability to source local, finding an awesome selection of products available.

I challenge you this summer to tune into the food that is produced on Whidbey Island’s local farms during our growing season. Then, consider stepping out of the “convenience first” model and adopt the “buy local first” model. There are a number of good reasons to take on this challenge for you, for your local rural economy, and for the environment. There is no question that our lives are busy and full. We get in a routine of getting all of our food at the nearest grocery store because it is convenient. In the United States, as well as in many parts of the developed world, if we have the financial resources, we as consumers and “eaters” expect to find whatever food desired at the nearest grocer. Eating what is locally produced in a particular season is no longer a necessity because, if it is not produced locally, we will get it from somewhere in the world. It takes a conscious effort and some energy to change this routine, but the rewards are many.

Local farmers tend to adopt farming practices that are environmentally sustainable. Farmers are close to their customers and it is a source of pride for them to have the opportunity to share with you about how your food is grown. If you have questions and you are buying directly from a farmer, you can ask. However, be ready for what could be a lengthy conversation, because farmers are passionate about this. Soil fertility, crop rotation, water conservation, produce varieties, and low impact pest control are all given careful consideration. Some local farmers have jumped through the hoops to achieve organic certification, but other local growers bring you very healthy food without being organically certified and feel the locally grown status assures the consumer good, safe food.

Sourcing local is a great way for you to help do your part in reducing fossil fuel use and related

greenhouse gas emissions used in the food system. The National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service estimates that on average, produce travels between 1,300 and 2,000 miles. Think about that. Whidbey Island is about 50 highway miles long and so, if you buy from a local farmer, the distance your food will travel is less than 4-percent of the average distance your food would travel if you purchase through a conventional source.

Sourcing your food locally may seem to be more expensive at first look. However, if you take a bag of locally grown spinach or lettuce and put it in the refrigerator next to the same product you might purchase from the grocery store that was transported from out of the state or out of the country, you’ll find your local product lasts much longer and you’ll have less spoilage and waste.

Admittedly, it takes more effort to source your food and other products locally, but it is a fun and satisfying adventure because you might get to meet your farmer. Here are a few tips to help you in this endeavor:

Whidbey Island has several partners working together to increase consumption of locally produced foods, as well as supporting other creators of items made with locally grown products. Restaurant owners are seeking out and embracing relationships with farmers so the salad, fruits, or meats on your restaurant dinner plate may have been grown locally. You can support your local farmers by asking the restaurants you frequent whether or not they are sourcing local. Bed and breakfast owners may offer soaps and products from locally produced lavender and other herbs. Farms growing hay for local livestock consumption are also members. The Whidbey Island Grown Brand collaborative project is tying all of these locally focused businesses together to help consumers find farmers and businesses who support this local effort. Visit [www.whidbeyislandgrown.com](http://www.whidbeyislandgrown.com) to learn more.

Additionally, there is an increase in locally grown product sales through roadside stands and on-farm stores because of the convenience for the farmer to market fresh products right from the farm and restock as needed throughout the day. Consumers can often find a stand or farm store, not far off their daily commuting route. When you buy from a roadside stand or farm store 100-percent of the purchase price more than likely goes directly to the farmer. Community Supported Agriculture subscriptions or “CSA’s” are another great way to buy direct from a farmer.

Whidbey Island also has a number of thriving Farmer and Public Markets that provide a social and recreational experience, as well as a place to gather your food and other products for the week. Saturday’s Coupeville Farmers market is the third oldest farmers market in the state, starting in 1979. Thursday’s Oak Harbor Farmers market began in 1994 and offers a variety of processed foods and crafts as well as fabulous produce. The Bayview Market at Bayview Corner is open Saturday morning, providing fresh produce, great food, and a good time. Clinton, Langley and South Whidbey Tilth also have open air public markets. The Goosefoot Foundation has gathered many of these sources into their annually published “Whidbey Island Roadside Farm Stand Farm Store & Farmers Market Directory.” Check it out by visiting <https://bit.ly/2K2T2q1>.

Whidbey Island’s hard-working farmers help create the rural landscape that is enjoyed by visitors and residents alike. Your commitment to invest your dollars locally goes a long way to ensure the long term economic sustainability of these local businesses so that we all can enjoy, live, and recreate throughout our beautiful Whidbey Island.

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