

Local, Organic Food for Every Budget

Hartford Courant, August 18, 2003

by Mark Winne

A recent University of Connecticut survey found that three-quarters of respondents think that locally grown food is healthier and fresher than food produced outside of the region. And at retail stores and stands across the country, organic food - produced without the aide of synthetic pesticides or fertilizers - is appearing faster than weeds in a summer garden, even though it often carries a premium price tag.

But the hot pursuit of local, organic produce stands in sharp contrast to the growth in food insecurity and hunger. Foodshare, the Hartford-area food bank, reports that requests for emergency food are up 72 percent this year. Every week, 31,000 state residents receive emergency food assistance. In the last 16 months, participation in Connecticut's food stamp program, now at 171,000 people, grew by 13 percent.

One way that low-income families cope with hardtimes is to buy less and cheaper food. There is little likelihood that Connecticut's needy will be flocking to Wild Oats in West Hartford, where an organic tomato went for \$4.99 per pound in early August. The same may be said for locally produced food. The UConn survey found that 44 percent of respondents thought locally grown was more expensive than non-local, a percentage that increased the lower the income of the respondent.

Obviously, a growing number of people see the value in purchasing locally produced food. But do the poor shop in one place and the affluent in another? And if local and organic is so much better for us, shouldn't everybody, regardless of income, be able to buy it?

Fortunately, Connecticut farmers, with help from government programs and nonprofit organizations, have found several ways to address this paradox. At Hartford's downtown farmers' market, you'll find Connecticut farmers selling homegrown fruits and vegetables to a steady stream of customers. Look closely and you'll see that many of the shoppers, especially young moms and senior citizens, are paying for their produce with special \$3 vouchers that bear the logo of the Connecticut Department of Agriculture. Since 1987, funding from the federal and state governments under the Farmers Market Nutrition Program has made it possible for these vouchers to go to low-income households. This year, a record 47,000 participants in the Women, Infant and Children program and 15,000 lower-income seniors will be buying organic tomatoes (which are affordable when purchased directly from the farmer) juicy peaches and sweet corn at 57 farmers' markets across the state.

Groups like the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts and the Hartford Food System's Holcomb Farm project have combined charitable contributions with income from produce sales to give thousands of low-income families the opportunity to share in the Northeast's organic harvest. The Urban Oaks Organic Farm, located in the heart of New Britain's North/Oak Street neighborhood, is producing high-quality produce for white-tablecloth restaurants as well as low-income moms and

elderly from the neighborhood. A combination of subsidies - WIC, Senior Farmers' Market vouchers and charitable support - with a solid understanding of the ethnic food preferences of their community make Urban Oaks affordable and accessible to the city's low-income families.

Foodshare distributes hundreds of thousands of pounds of produce, donated by 15 Connecticut farms, to the area's neediest families. Items include strawberries from the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in Windsor, organic tomatoes from Old Maid Farm in Glastonbury, and squash and peppers from Spencer Farm in East Hartford.

Even in cash-strapped local school districts, Connecticut-grown produce is finding its way to the cafeteria. With funding from the National School Lunch Program, creative school districts like West Haven's are buying tons of fruit every week directly from nearby orchards. Every one of the town's 8,000 students, including the 40 percent whose lower incomes qualify them for free and reduced-price lunch, can buy Connecticut apples and pears. A bill in Congress co-sponsored by Reps. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, and Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District, would give school districts additional incentives to purchase food from local farmers.

Connecticut is closing the food gap between high- and low-income shoppers.

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