



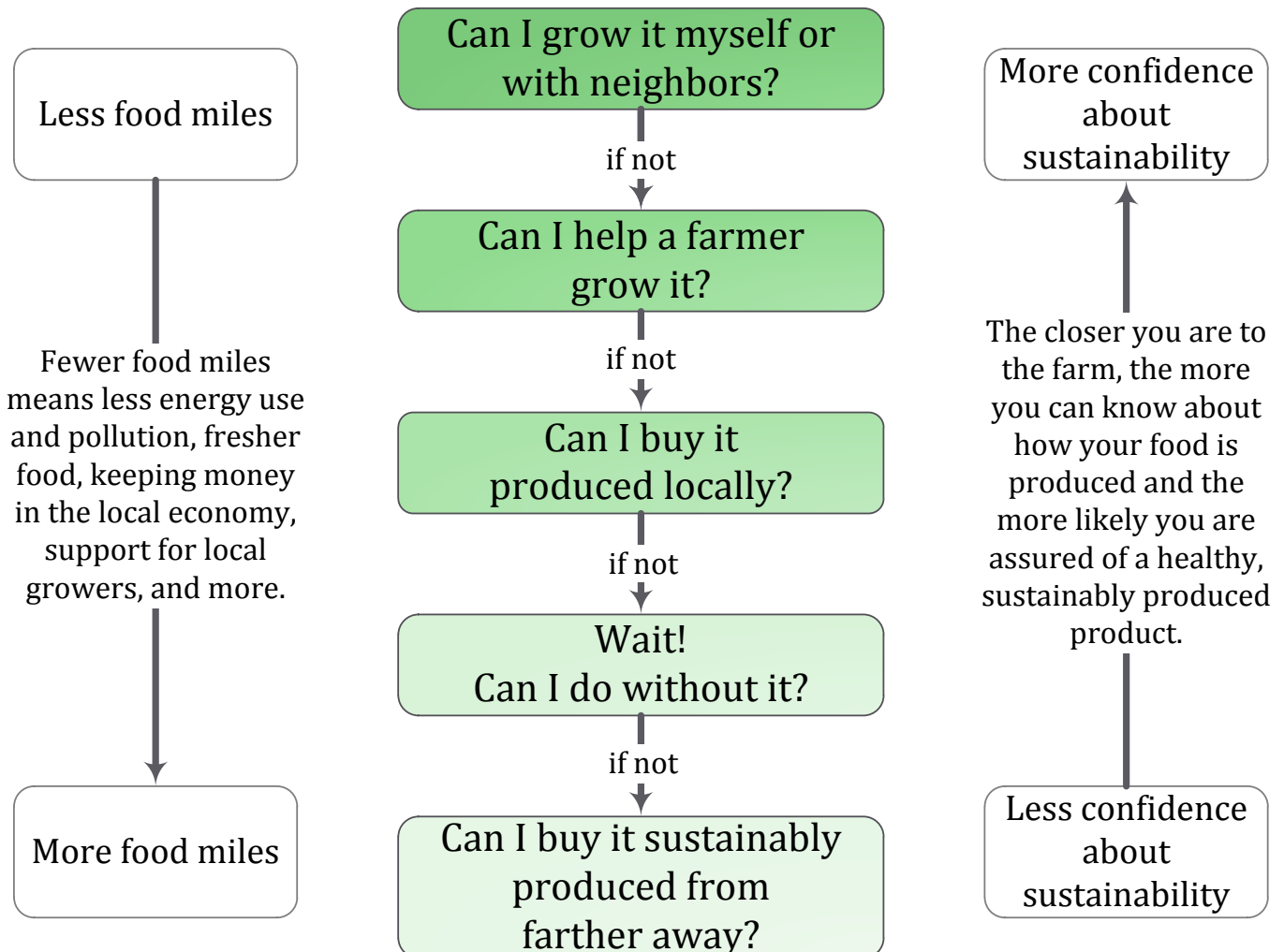
# Sustainable Food Choices

*As local as possible—always healthy and sustainably produced.*

More and more people are looking for food that is local and sustainably produced. How do we navigate all the choices presented to us? Local food has its own inherent benefits and is likely to be healthier for us. Local food isn't necessarily sustainable, but is more likely to be and allows us more opportunities to be sure it is sustainably produced. The diagram below shows the basic choices facing you.



I want a tomato



## SUSTAINABLY PRODUCED

Sustainability starts with on-farm production and includes practices that are:

- **Environmentally sound** for our air, water, land, wildlife, and climate.
- **Economically viable** for consumers and growers alike.
- **Just and fair** to farm workers, farm animals, diverse cultures, and local communities.



It also includes practices past the farm gate:

- **Processing** only as needed to add real value and retain nutrition.
- **Packaging** as needed, but conserving resources and cost.
- **Shipping** if justified and energy efficient.
- **Marketing** that is honest and fair to all.

## CAN I GROW IT MYSELF OR WITH NEIGHBORS?

**Yes, you can!** Nearly everyone can grow at least some of their food—from sprouts in the kitchen, to a container tomato plant on the deck, to a full backyard (or front yard!) garden.

Some people need or would prefer to join with neighbors to set up a community garden with individual plots or with communal areas sharing the space, the work, the equipment, and the harvest.

Just get started, on however small a scale—experimentation is fine, and there are many people willing to help you learn as you go. Even on a small scale, growing some of your own food will help you better understand your food, making you a more informed eater and a wiser consumer of things you do need to buy.

## CAN I HELP A FARMER GROW IT?

You could always volunteer to help a nearby farmer who is growing your food, or harvest your own at a U-pick farm, but one of the increasingly common ways is the CSA—Community Supported Agriculture:

- Typically the customer pays ahead for an estimated season's worth of food to help the farmer's cash flow and planning in the spring.
- The CSA shareholder gets a basket of food, usually each week—the contents depend on the harvest that week.
- Sometimes the shareholders can work on the farm a few hours to reduce the cost of the share.
- By sharing the risk with the farmer, shareholders clearly demonstrate their support for the farmer and have many opportunities to learn how their food is produced—and to influence those practices as well.



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## CAN I BUY IT PRODUCED LOCALLY?

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Farmers markets, farm stands, and other formal or informal purchases directly from the grower give you the best chance to discuss how the product was produced.

Buying locally produced products in stores, restaurants, or even schools gives you less direct contact with the grower, but you still can:

- Look for the farm source and farmer profile on store signage, restaurant menus, or school posters.
  - ◊ Ask if you don't see any information!
- Make contact with that grower at their farm or at a farmers market to find out more.
- Find details about their growing practices in a Local Food Directory, if available.

Talk to the grower or find out about the sustainable practices listed on page 2. A good—and polite—way to start is to ask the grower why they are proud of their product and how it is produced. Letting them tell you their story may answer many of your questions quite naturally.

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## CAN I DO WITHOUT IT?

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**Timeout!** If the product you want is not available from a local source, this is a good time to stop and ask yourself if you *really* need it or:

- Is there a locally produced product that could be substituted?—for example, apple juice instead of orange juice.
- Is a stored or preserved local product available?—for example, canned local tomatoes instead of fresh, energy-intensive tomatoes in your salsa in January.
- Is it simply better enjoyed in season instead of shipped or even preserved?—for example, asparagus.
- Or—I do need it! It is just one of those few things that I will bring in from elsewhere, but I'll try to reduce imports in other areas of my diet—for example, coffee.



### IMPROVING YOUR AVAILABLE FOOD CHOICES

You probably aren't happy with the food choices available to you—in terms of both localness and sustainability of production. Things you do now, however, can improve your choices in the future.

- Keep asking retailers, restaurants, and other food sources for the products you want.
- Learn how to store and preserve foods you grow or can buy at harvest time for year-round enjoyment.
- Support policy improvements that promote local and sustainable food production and growers.
- Start planning your container or backyard garden now!

Growing your own food sidesteps many obstacles: cost, availability, food safety concerns, and lack of credible information. It may not be easy, but may in fact be much easier than overcoming those obstacles otherwise.

## CAN I BUY IT SUSTAINABLY PRODUCED FROM FARTHER AWAY?

For those products you can't seem to find locally or find local alternatives—which for now still may be the majority of your food—it is just as important to make the best choices possible. A few guidelines include:

- Keep using the “as close as possible” approach while considering overall sustainability.
- Remember food miles are just one measure of energy savings—the mode of shipping, energy used in processing, and on-farm energy use are critical as well.
- Question the need for any food shipped by air, even for the sake of freshness.
- Avoid “anonymous food”—that which we know little if anything about its contents, healthiness, source, or manner of production.

### *Overwhelmed by choices?*

Researching food choices can be a big task. Food co-ops and food buying clubs are ways to work with like-minded people to source the best food possible. Members can agree on basic sustainability guidelines and pool their efforts to find the foods best meeting those guidelines. Ideally members will be active in developing guidelines that are consistent with their values.



- Choose whole foods as much as possible—cooking from scratch circumvents many of the pitfalls of the industrial processed food system.
- Watch for corporate attempts to manipulate your food choices and for “greenwashing” ploys—the Consumers Reports [www.ecolabels.org](http://www.ecolabels.org) website can help.
- Find brands, stores, buying clubs, food co-ops, and websites that you trust.
- Don't get lost in your research—remember to do your best, work for better food choices, and take time to enjoy eating good food!

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Find online resources for this tool, as well as additional tool booklets on other community food topics, under “Food System Tools” at [www.healthycommunityfoodsystems.org](http://www.healthycommunityfoodsystems.org) or [www.HCFS.org](http://www.HCFS.org)



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