

Shopping at a local farmers market has several benefits. It is a great way to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. It supports the local economy. It can serve as an outing with your family and encourage picky eaters to try new foods. Typically, fresh fruits and vegetables sold at farmers markets have been picked within 24 to 48 hours of the sale date – keeping the nutritional value, taste and texture of the produce at its best. Finally, it's fun way to make food purchases that expand your family's menu with new fresh foods.

Knowing what is in season for Kansas-grown fresh fruits and vegetables is helpful in writing a list of potential purchases at the farmers market. K-State Research and Extension has published a composite list of the seasonal availability of such produce that can be accessed at <http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/mf2647.pdf>. You may want to review the list before you head to the market.

Some of the produce in season right now includes asparagus, beets, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, Chinese cabbage, green onions, kohlrabi, lettuce, peas, rhubarb, spinach and strawberries, among others. It won't be long before we see fresh herbs, summer apples, green beans, cucumbers, a summer squash.

When shopping for local foods there are some preparation steps you can take for a trip to the farmers market.

First, bring your own bags or cartons. Using washable fabric bags will reduce waste and promote safe food handling. Don't the thin plastic bags that grocery stores use. These bags can cause problems in the area of food safety. They were designed to be used once, and then thrown away. In our attempt to recycle and reuse as much as possible, we often save them for reuse. However, it is nearly impossible to sanitize the bags after they have been used to carry perishable foods. As they are stored tightly balled up in a warm house, bacteria from the perishable foods begins to grow. Using the fabric bags will allow you to wash and dry the bag after each use. Make sure you are using clean fabric bags each time you leave for the market.

If you are purchasing small, tender fruits such as berries, taking your own plastic cartons or storage containers will help protect them from being damaged while you continue shopping. They are also easier to stack in a cooler for transport. If you plan to purchase a large quantity of produce, you may want to take a cooler on wheels or a wagon to put your produce in.

Second, carry cash for more convenience. Although some farmers markets vendors have the capability for using a credit or debit card, most do not. Make sure

you have mostly small bills to make it easier to use nearly exact change. This also makes it easier on the vendors to make change with customers.

Third, wear comfortable walking shoes. You want your time at the market to be relaxing and casual, so wearing shoes that provide good support will better allow for that. Additionally, wearing comfortable shoes makes it easier to shop around to the different vendors, ensuring you get the best price for the produce you are buying.

Third, know what is in season. As mentioned previously, do a bit of research to know what is available at different times of the season. Many people like to purchase at farmers markets to support the local economy and support Kansas producers, as a whole. However, the produce sold at a local open-air market may not all be from Kansas. Each market can establish its own requirements for what is being sold and its point of origin.

Some customers are looking to buy produce in bulk for home canning purposes. Knowing what is in season will help you make home food preservation more economical since “in season” produce is less expensive to buy than when it is out of season.

Fourth, talk to the vendor or attendant. These folks can share a variety of information that will help you determine what you want to buy. They know about the food, and often can share ideas about how to prepare it if it is something new to you. They may also be able to share how it was grown, when it was picked (i.e. how fresh it is), and how to select the ripest produce. By talking with the vendor, you will soon become aware of which ones are the most attentive to their clients and know the most about their products.

Here's a simple recipe that uses some of the products you may find at the farmer's market:

Flavorful Green Beans

2 lbs. fresh green beans

½ c. water

1/3 cu. Green onions, chopped

4 cloves garlic, chopped

Nonstick cooking spray

½ tsp. black pepper

1-1/2 tsp. fresh basil (or ½ tsp. dried basil)

1-1/2 tsp. fresh oregano (or ½ tsp. dried oregano)

Rinse green beans and snap off tips. Place green beans in a large pot and add ½ c. cold water. Cook green beans on stovetop over medium heat for 10 minutes. In a separate pan, sauté chopped onions and garlic, using the cooking spray, for 5 minutes

or until they are tender and very lightly browned. Add onions, garlic, and black pepper to green beans. Spray the cooking spray lightly over mixture, and cook on medium heat for another 20 minutes or until green beans are tender. Stir in oregano and basil and serve. (Serving size 1 c.; 40 Calories; 0 g total fat; 12 mg sodium; 4 g fiber; 2 g protein; 9 g carbohydrates)

Source: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/other/chdblack/cooking.pdf>

If you have questions about fresh produce selection or preparation, contact the Geary County Extension Office 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!