

Strategies for Eating More Sustainably

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Eating Sustainably

“**Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.**” These are the seven words that writer, journalist and professor Michael Pollan uses to introduce his book *In Defense of Food*. I’m going to focus on four of these words: “eat food” and “mostly plants.” When Pollan advises his readers to eat food, what he really means is to eat *real* food, as in steer clear of those processed foods with lengthy ingredients lists and words you can’t pronounce. Real food includes fruits, vegetables and whole grains. This is where the “mostly plants” comes into play. Although Pollan’s words often appear in the context of conversations on human health, they also play a role in conversations on sustainability. Keeping Pollan’s seven words in mind, let’s walk through a practical and widely accessible four-step approach to eating more sustainably.



Step 1: Limit Processed Foods (eat food, mostly plants)

Most chips, sodas, processed snacks and other packaged foods come from processed corn and soy grown on large-scale conventional farms. Instead, try purchasing and cooking with whole foods that are not processed or are processed minimally, such as whole grains, and raw fruits and vegetables. By reducing processed food purchases and purchasing whole foods instead, you will reduce your reliance on industrial agriculture, reduce waste, and be in more control of the nutritional content and freshness of your meals. Also, this strategy may be cheaper in the long run since healthier processed foods tend to be more expensive compared to their whole food counterparts.

Step 2 and 3: Eat Seasonal and Shop Local

Eating seasonally means eating food at the same time it’s grown in your local area. The conditions of each season determine the types of produce that can be grown at that time. Therefore, as the seasons change, the produce that you can source from local regions will change as well. By purchasing produce from local regions, you are not only supporting local farmers, but you are supporting the local economy and reducing the emissions associated with the long-distance transportation of produce. If you’re living in the Bay Area, check out this [seasonal produce chart](#). Can’t find what you’re looking for or you’re living outside the Bay Area? Try searching online for “seasonal produce” in your local region.

Step 4: Purchase Organic

If you are interested in purchasing organic foods, remember that it does not have to be all or nothing. Consider starting out by selecting a few fruits or vegetables to purchase organic. For this, it may be helpful to use the [“Dirty Dozen”](#) list as a guide. This list was created by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) and includes the crops that are found to have the highest levels of pesticide residue. To potentially limit your exposure to the pesticide residue, and to limit your support of synthetic pesticide application on conventionally grown crops, consider purchasing the crops on this list organic.

Progressing Through The Four Steps

When considering eating more sustainably, remember that organic is *not* the only option. Limiting processed foods, eating seasonal produce, and shopping local are all options that remain widely accessible and reduce your footprint. Try out the steps in this approach and figure out what works best for you!

Sourcing Food Sustainably

Being a more conscious and sustainable consumer also means being aware of where your food is coming from. So, let's go through some of the many ways you can source your food more sustainably within your community.



Grow Your Own Produce

You can start small by planting an herb garden in your backyard or planting leafy greens in pots on a front porch or windowsill. As you become more comfortable with planting and growing, consider expanding your garden and experimenting with new crops. Soil, compost, seeds, and plants can be found at a local plant nursery or even a local hardware store. Local farms and gardens may also host seasonal starter plant sales. For example, every spring and fall, The Forge Garden hosts a starter plant sale. For more information on home gardening, check out The Forge Garden website for more information, videos, and events on gardening.

Shop Local Farmers Markets

Farmers markets are a way for local farmers and other vendors to sell their products, which can range from fruits and vegetables to baked goods and mushrooms. Both organic and conventional produce is sold by local farmers at the markets. For all consumers, whether purchasing conventional or organic produce, shopping at farmers markets is a more sustainable choice than shopping at grocery stores because you are choosing to buy seasonal produce from a farm in your local area. In addition to it being the more sustainable option, I have found that produce from farmers markets is often similarly priced to produce from local grocery stores (especially in the Bay Area).

One aspect of farmers markets that can often overwhelm consumers is that there are multiple organic and conventional vendors at each market. To select between vendors, I suggest looking for 1) the location of the farm and 2) the price of the produce. If you can, try to support more local farms and be aware that different farms may be selling the same product at different prices.

If you're in the Bay Area, here are some of the largest farmers markets in Santa Clara County.

Farmers Market	Day of the Week	Distance from Campus
Santa Clara Farmers Market	Saturday	10 minute walk 5 minute bike
Mountain View Farmers Market	Sunday	15 minute drive 1 hour bike
Sunnyvale Farmers Market	Saturday	15 minute drive 40 minute bike
Campbell Farmers Market	Sunday	10 minute drive 30 minute bike
Palo Alto Farmers Market	Saturday	30 minute drive

Shop Farm Stands



Compared to a farmers market with multiple vendors, a farm stand is a market with produce from only one farm or garden and it is typically located on-site. Unlike farmers markets, which have limited hours of operation, farm stands are often open more days of the week and for more hours. Many farm stands, especially those that include produce from a backyard garden, may have an honor-based pay station or be donation based. Both The Forge Garden and Veggielution, a community farm in San Jose, host weekly farm stands to sell their produce. Check out their websites for more information.

Sign up for a CSA box

If you want produce from a local farm but don't want to commit to going to a farmers market or farm stand every week, try signing up for a CSA box. Community Supported Agriculture, also referred to as CSA, is another great way to support local farmers. Farms that have a CSA program allow customers to purchase boxes of produce from the farm every week. Sometimes, farms offer customizable boxes so that customers can pick and choose the fruits and vegetables they want in their box, while others do not. If you can't customize your box, it'll definitely make you more creative in the kitchen.



Spade & Plow, an organic farm in San Martin, CA, offers CSA boxes that are available for pickup at The Forge Garden.

Interested? Check out their [website](#) and learn more about their farm box.

Gleaning

Gleaning produce can mean harvesting leftover crops from farmer's fields after the commercial harvest has been completed. It can also mean harvesting leftover fruit from neighborhood fruit trees. Although it is unlikely that you will find yourself harvesting leftover crops from a farm, bountiful fruit trees are a common occurrence in Santa Clara and people are usually eager to share the pounds of fruit on their tree.



This summer, I noticed that my neighbor's fruit tree had ripe apples still on the tree. Curious to taste the apples, I wrote a note asking if I could harvest some of the remaining apples and left my phone number. A few hours later, I received a text from Bill, my neighbor, welcoming me to any of the fruit on the tree. I harvested close to 30 fuji-like apples that day—I treated my housemates to some and donated the others to The Forge's Community Resilience Bags. Gleaning is a willingness to put yourself out there; it's a willingness to get to know your neighbors and your community; and it's a willingness to work hard to reduce food waste. Give it a try!

Shop Local Supermarkets

And of course, you can always get your produce from a local supermarket. However, if you are shopping at a supermarket, I encourage you to be a cautious supermarket shopper: supermarkets can carry produce from all over the world. When shopping, try to purchase produce that is both seasonal and local. All of the produce in the store should have a label to indicate where it was grown.