



11/11/13

Become a Savvy Farmer’s Market Shopper

Farmers' markets are becoming more commonplace in neighborhoods around the country. With this increase in popularity has come an increase in vendors and consumer choice.

When it comes to buying vegetables, start small: Buy salad ingredients to have at dinner each night. Purchase vegetables you know how to prepare. Once you gain confidence, add new items. Also, search for staples you'd normally buy at the supermarket like eggs, flour, bread, coffee, fish, nuts, seeds, honey and even soap. Since items at a farmer's market change often, bring a general shopping list rather than a specific one for the whole week

Here are more ideas on how to maximize your trip to the farmers' market:

- Don't be shy. The people selling products want to answer your questions, so go ahead and ask them what sun chokes are.
- Learn the lingo. Not all farmers can afford the organic certification, so ask them the difference between "greenhouse grown" and "grown or raised without hormones." You'll become a savvier shopper at any store after learning from the experts.
- Do your homework. Find a market that's in a convenient location and with hours that fit your schedule so you can easily add a shopping trip into your weekly routine. Visit www.localharvest.org for markets in your area.
- Time your outing. If you can only go on weekends, get there early. Otherwise, go on a weekday in the middle of the day. The less traffic in the market, the more opportunities you'll have to get the best products and chat with vendors. If you're shopping on a budget, going at the end of the market day will usually enable you to get some great deals and negotiate prices with the vendors.
- Bring cash and reusable bags. Small bills will make transactions easy and you'll need a sturdy, eco-friendly bag to carry your purchases home.
- Become a gourmet. Ask the vendors for cooking suggestions; sometimes they provide recipes. Or enter your new vegetable in the search box at www.epicurious.com to discover recipe ideas.
- Be flexible. Accept that produce will not look perfect. But it has been grown naturally and picked recently, which means it's packed with flavor and nutrients.

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