


# Create a Thriving *Local Food Scene*

Support farmers and strengthen your community's food systems.

By Robert Turner

Some third-graders from a local elementary school came to my farm for a tour, and I saw it as an opportunity to test their knowledge. So, before they arrived, I tied some carrots to a small maple tree by the vegetable garden.

When we walked past the tree, I said, "There it is, kids: the carrot tree." They didn't question it, and no one said a word. It made perfect sense to them. Why not a carrot tree? After all, apples grow on trees too.

Later in the tour, I pulled a carrot out of the ground, and a bunch of little noses scrunched up. Some of the kids were a bit concerned that food came out of the dirt like that, and I think they preferred carrots from a tree because it was cleaner. I apologized for tricking them and explained how carrots are actually grown.

Many of us are a little disconnected from our food, but my point is this—I believe every kid should go on a farm tour at least once, because the future of food production begins and ends with the next generation. The average age of a farmer in the U.S. is 58.1 years old and rising. If we want to build up our local-food systems, we'll need to spark interest in young people early on, so we'll have the bandwidth and brain power over the next few decades to grow the food.

We'll also need to teach kids where exactly food in the stores comes from and why local food is important. We need to help them see—and remind ourselves—that stronger local and regional food-production systems will limit the inherent risks and waste of transporting food from faraway places. Local growing systems will also help us face droughts and floods while improving food security, food sovereignty, and community health and resilience. Historically, supporting local farms and producing your own food were the only options. As we move ahead, it needs to be reemphasized.

As we throw back to a past when local farms were supported by necessity, we need, at the same time, to embrace the expertise that'll allow us to keep up with food production in an uncertain future. The landscape of farming is changing; it's become more complex as we've learned more about soil health and the importance of microorganisms, carbon cycles, and the impacts of intensifying weather events. The farmer of the future must grow and raise food while becoming an amateur scientist—an agronomist, a botanist, a biologist, and even a climatologist—to be successful and, more importantly, sustainable.

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Gauge your locale's current farming landscape so you can identify what it has and what it needs.

Robert Turner

There can be large farms on hundreds or thousands of acres growing a single crop, such as corn, and small farms growing a variety of vegetables on an acre or two for a farmstand or local farmers market (or simply to share with family and friends). Regardless of scale, we need to assess our own communities for where we are, where we want to go, and what tools will help us get there. We need to have conversations with farmers, local government representatives, grocery stores, restaurants, food banks, hospitals, schools, neighbors, and more. Let's perform an honest inventory and assessment of our capacity to produce local food, and then figure out how to get where we want to be.

## Getting Your Bearings

The journey toward self-reliance in local food begins with asking yourself these important questions: What are the current production capabilities in your area? How many large and small farms exist in your region? You'll need several small and midsized farms growing a range of fruits and vegetables to supply the local-food economy with enough variety to provide a healthy diet. If the supply side is sufficient, there must still be demand for local-food products to sustain it, including "value-added" products. Performing an honest self-assessment is a good place to start evaluating resources and gaps.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture (*www.NASS.USDA.gov/AgCensus*) can give you important information about the current farming landscape in your county, such as the number of farms and acres in farming, the types and market value of products sold, farming-related income and expenses, the percentage of farms that use no-till practices or farm organically, the percentage of those that sell directly to consumers, and much more. Because the USDA website is complicated, it may be easiest to find a good summary of your county stats by performing an online search for your county and state alongside the phrase "census of agriculture county profile." A PDF summary of stats for your county should appear as one of the first search results. These data are updated every five years and the summaries provide useful information in a tight, presentable package.

An organization called Community Food Strategies (*www.CommunityFoodStrategies.org*) offers a nice, web-based template for a "community food snapshot" that you can use to create an overview of your current local-food environment, including information about community health, equity, access to broadband, farm economy, and ecosystem health. Both "snapshots" from Community Food Strategies and the USDA can be presented to stakeholders as you organize and build a local-food movement so you can begin to change the food system from the ground up.

The important thing is to understand your community's local-food potential. Who are the producers of food products in your region, and what types of farming operations do they have? How much of the food that's eaten locally can be grown locally? Keep in mind the bigger picture of food and consumer trends, demographics, and markets. Within this larger context,

you can identify the greatest barriers and opportunities for building a thriving local-food economy and the steps that'll work for your community. A local-food assessment is a powerful tool to achieve this.

Local brews can boost spirits *and* a broader local-food scene.

## Bringing the Community Together

Neighborhoods and communities must work together to visualize and materialize the production, distribution, and access to food they want. Here are some examples. Together, we can come up with even better ideas uniquely suited to our own communities.

Asking local restaurants and grocers to carry more local produce is perhaps the easiest part of a local-food campaign. Speak with your wallet. According to the National Restaurant Association, local food is the No. 1 trend in the restaurant industry today, and that certainly works in your favor. But the goal is also to attract and support local-food processors and "value-added" producers (especially those that incorporate local grains or produce), such as bakeries or producers of salsa and hot sauce, because they contribute to circular economic development, another important part of the local-food economy. Keep at it: See if you can help get local food into schools or hospitals. Help local school groups take field trips to farms.

Start a farmers market if you don't already have one, or volunteer to help those that currently exist. This could be as simple as showing market managers (and farmers) how to take better pictures of vegetables for a website or social media. Organize and promote a weekend-long farm tour across the region and include a map so people can plan their route. You can even host an annual Business of Farming Conference, where speakers and farmers get together to share best practices, such as marketing, recordkeeping, or forming cooperatives.

Microbreweries and local brewers are now a booming industry in many towns and regions across the country, and they can be an important spark for a broader, flourishing local-food scene. Don't underestimate the power of local beer. Better yet, the spent grains can be composted or fed to local livestock, such as pigs and poultry, to keep them out of the landfill. What other projects that reduce food waste can your community engage in?

## Toward a Sustainable Future

A local-food movement builds demand by continually reminding people why it's important to eat fresh, local food from local farmers. It also requires a plan for developing regional food-production capacity through education, training, and workshops, and your plan could include various manuals and toolboxes. Value-added producers and food trucks need access to a shared commissary kitchen—put it in the plan. Organize, advocate, and build community. Anyone who eats is a stakeholder, and an investment in local food is an investment in community health.

A local-food guide (in print and online) is a great place to start. Tell people where they can purchase food from local farms (restaurants, grocers, and farmstands). Provide a brief profile of all participating farms in the region and whether they offer regular farm tours or have a farm store. List the farmers markets in your area, the days and times of operation, and which farmers you can expect to find there. Highlight markets that accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cards. Link farmers to markets and create connections within the local-food system.

Do you know someone who'd like to get started with small-scale food production?

From Top: Adobe Stock/Kristen; Adobe Stock/Monkey Business


Launch a local-food movement by asking nearby restaurants and grocers to carry local produce.

**A LABOR OF LOVE!** Farmers markets don't just happen! In this video, learn about the behind-the-scenes labor that goes into maintaining a quality farmers market. Get involved and support your local food network by learning from the experiences shared at *www.MotherEarthNews.com/Farmers-Market-Plan*.



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Connect them with resources. Just about every city and county in the country has untapped sources for education in agriculture, including your local farm extension office. You can find experienced growers and teachers at your local garden supply stores and gardening clubs and at community and state colleges. Almost every region of the country has experienced growers who can offer practical classroom and field instruction or mentoring in fruit, vegetable, meat, and egg production.

Look to other cities with thriving local-food movements and translate the successful parts to your community. Asheville, North Carolina, for example, is aiming to become a leader in agriculture technology (AgTech) research and development, which it hopes will drive economic development while helping local farmers and producers. The city is asking questions, such as how to attract and grow AgTech businesses in the region, and how to attract entrepreneurs and companies working to improve efficiency and productivity on the farm and in the value chains.

A North Carolina organization near me, Dogwood Health Trust, commissioned a report to answer some of these questions. The surrounding area is a leader in controlled-environment agriculture, with greenhouses covering hundreds of acres. It has agricultural organizations, including the Utopian Seed Project (*www.TheUtopianSeedProject.org*), which is trialing hundreds of varieties of okra and other food crops to find the best varieties suited to the region and climate, focusing on biodiversity and crop resilience. What can be replicated where you live? What is your area already doing? The key is understanding the assets already in your community and building on them to create economic development in agriculture.

The USDA recently released a report that the farmers' share of the U.S. food dollar dipped below 15 cents in 2022. This means that for every dollar you spent on food, the farmer received just 15 cents. Most of that dollar went to companies along the supply chain, including processors, distributors, marketers, and retailers. Circular economic development refers to a system where more money stays in the local economy, from farmer to producer to consumer. It's a closed-loop system, in which all aspects of production begin and end in the region, from agriculture; to manufacturing and production; to distribution, marketing, and retail; and, finally, to consumption and waste reclamation. It's a key concept and argument for local-food systems, because it keeps money flowing through the local economy rather than going straight off to some faraway multinational corporate headquarters.

How can you help that happen?

Robert Turner is a science writer focused on food and farming, environmental science, and new technologies that improve food security, food sovereignty, and community resilience. He owns and operates an organic farm in the mountains of western North Carolina.