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Good times greening at local farmers markets

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Let's just eat our way to a better planet.

If that sounds like fun, well, it is. Farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture programs have accomplished what many thought was impossible: They have turned "going green" into a good time. This has helped make these buy-local food programs a delicious success story of the modern environmental movement.

Q: Farmers markets certainly have lots of benefits, but are they really that green?

A: The great selection of fresh foods, the opportunity to support local farmers, and the vibrant social scene may be the main draws, but if you dig a little deeper you find abundant environmental advantages.

Many farmers at these markets use few or no pesticides while also conserving resources and reducing global-warming impacts by producing food close to where it is sold. Farmers-market foods also frequently require less packaging and contain fewer preservatives than grocery-store products.

Q: What's new with farmers markets here in the Puget Sound area?

A: Our region is a national hotbed for farmers markets, with more than 100 in Western Washington. In Seattle, new markets debut this summer in Georgetown and at the Olympic Sculpture Park near Belltown. Several farmers markets are now open year-round.

From their roots as a source for a few types of seasonal produce and flowers, many farmers markets have grown into vast cornucopias. If you haven't visited a farmers market lately, the expanding selection of meats, fish and dairy products will be a revelation. You can even buy a bottle of wine at some markets.

An increasing number of farmers markets have begun to accept food-stamp cards, as well as credit and debit cards.

Q: Aren't most farmers markets pretty much the same?

A: Not at all. Each boasts its own personality. Some farmers markets include crafts vendors and others don't, and some markets allow customers to bring dogs while others ask you to leave Fido at home.

Since many smaller vendors come to just one or two markets, your neighborhood farmers market will likely include a few rare and quirky delights, such as the red wiggler worms (for worm composting bins) recently offered at the Magnolia Farmers Market.

Q: So what exactly are Community Supported Agriculture programs, or CSAs? The name doesn't give much of a clue.

A: CSAs are delivery or pickup services for foods from local farmers, including some of the same ones who sell at farmers markets. Customers who subscribe typically receive a box of seasonal bounty every week during the growing season, often delivered to a central location. Find a full list of CSAs and farmers markets at www.pugetsoundfresh.org.

Q: How have CSAs changed in recent years?

A: As with farmers markets, we now have many more to choose from, with about 90 CSAs operating in the Puget Sound area this year. Today's CSAs offer much greater flexibility for customers, says Karen Kinney, King County's coordinator for sustainable agriculture programs.

A vegetable grower may partner with a tree-fruit grower, for instance, so they can provide more variety in their weekly CSA box. Several CSAs have introduced online ordering. A growing number of farmers now offer add-ons, so you can order an extra dozen eggs or a bouquet of flowers for a particular week.

Numerous CSAs will deliver to groups of employees at their workplace, another flourishing trend. Call Kinney at 206-263-6429 if you are interested in setting up CSA delivery at your workplace in King County.

Q: Does it cost more to shop at farmers markets and CSAs?

A: Not necessarily. Some items at farmers markets, especially organic produce, are less expensive than at the grocery store, according to several Seattle University student-research projects.

But you can't put a price on the smells and the colors and seeing those giant goose eggs for the first time. Or the farmer's smile, and your own smile right back.

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