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MAINE COMPASS: Locally produced food is more sustainable way to grow

Bonnie Sammons

"Food, glorious food, We're anxious to try it. Three banquets a day, Our favorite diet!"

MS Opinion



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The starving orphans in that long ago musical, "Oliver," said it well. Where would we be without food?

We all love to eat, but since the advent of industrial agriculture, more and more of us seem to know less and less about where our food comes from and the energy that is expended in getting it to our plates. Just a few generations ago, nearly everyone in the country was involved in agriculture in some form. Today, 2 percent of our population grows food for the rest of us, which frees us from the bondage of feeding ourselves to undertake myriad other occupations.

Economies of scale have advantages, but there is always a dark side. Consider this: For every food calorie we consume, 7-10 calories are expended to plant, fertilize, grow, harvest, package and transport that calorie. A beef calorie is far more expensive, according to a Johns Hopkins University study, at a whopping 35 calories for every beef calorie that we consume.

Remember that a calorie is simply a unit that quantifies energy inputs and outputs. With this in mind, it would appear that our food production system is -- dare I say it -- unsustainable. A business with more expenses than revenues, that produces less than is put into it, will not last long.

If we were expending our own human energy to plant, grow and harvest our food with a 7 to 1 ratio of inputs to outputs, we would be very thin indeed. Instead, we use vast quantities of fossil fuels to power the agricultural system that feeds us. Transportation and fertilizers derived from fossil fuels account for a significant portion of agricultural energy inputs.

Food travels an average of 1,500 miles before being consumed. This seemed like a fine idea when fuel was inexpensive and seemingly inexhaustible.

Just because we can do something, however, doesn't necessarily mean that we should. The understanding that local food is more sustainable food may be dawning simultaneously with the awareness that we cannot sustain the profligate waste inherent in our industrial food production system.

How can we reduce the energy inputs of the food that ends up on our plates? An increasing number of people are buying locally grown food in Central Maine.

Buying locally produced food reduces fossil fuel use, and local food tastes better because it's fresh.

A Georgia peach, for example, is harvested weeks before you eat it. We can grow peaches in Maine. Buying them locally reduces farm-to-table transit time, resulting in fresher, better-tasting, more nutritious food. It also results in getting to know a local farmer, supports the local economy and increases our self-sufficiency.

This year also is a good time to consider growing some of our own food. It's empowering to produce food and gratifying to see the impact it has on the grocery bill. Community gardens, which are literally sprouting up in several localities, provide another avenue for getting tasty local food on our plates.

If we don't want to get our hands dirty, we can join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and pick up fresh, locally grown produce, eggs and cheeses as well as value-added products weekly while supporting local farmers.

People who already have their own gardens can share/swap with neighbors. Others can buy local foods at natural food stores and farm stands. For a fun challenge, try eating only local foods for one day a week.

When we consider the benefits of local food, the variety of options for obtaining them and the costs of industrial agriculture, we realize we can't afford to not support a more sustainable local food system.

It is not the whole solution, but it's a step in the direction of sustainable, and glorious, food.

Bonnie Sammons of Belgrade is a member of the Sustain Mid Maine Coalitions' Education Team, former Messalonskee High School science teacher and an aspiring farmer.

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