



Organic food is often praised as better-tasting and more nutritious than its conventional equivalent, and it's grown with fewer chemicals. But because it typically travels long distances to get to consumers, it has a significant environmental cost.

One alternative is locally grown food, which is of course readily available at the nine farmers' markets in the Quad Cities area.

But you'll likely have difficulty finding locally grown produce at a nearby grocery store. Some stores carry locally produced fruits and vegetables, but the labeling is often nonexistent or unclear, leaving customers uncertain whether they're buying an apple from within a few miles or from across the country.

## Farmers' Markets

In Iowa alone, there are now about 215 registered farmers' markets, compared to 182 last year, according to the Iowa Department of Agriculture. In Illinois, the number of farmers' markets jumped from 97 to approximately 280 over the past decade, according to the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

"You're going to get more taste out of your food because our local producers let things ripen on the vine," said Cathy Lafrenz, membership chair for Buy Fresh Buy Local Quad Cities. Furthermore, she said, "every time you buy from a local farmer, that dollar is spent three times in that community. It goes around in a circle."

"Farmers' markets contribute to the economic and social vitality of the community," said Jane Weber of the Mississippi Valley Growers' Association publicity committee.

The not-for-profit organization hosts three weekly farmers' markets. (See [sidebar](#) .) Products at these markets must be "homegrown, home-baked, or home-crafted" by the vendor's family, according to the official rules of the association. If a consumer has a complaint or a question about whether a vendor is selling homegrown products, the Mississippi Valley Growers' Association will perform a farm check "to verify that they're growing what they say they're growing," said Weber.

At markets sponsored by the Quad Cities Farmers Market, all products must come from within 50 miles of the Quad Cities, according to Gene Mohr, vice president of the organization. Vendors must also grow everything that they sell.

Some farmers' markets are not exclusively local. The Freight House Farmers' Market in Davenport allows non-local products but requires clear signage that states the products' origin, according to market chair Darcy Rostenbach. To be labeled as local, the product must come from within 100 miles of the market.

Similarly, vendors at the River City Market Association are allowed to sell non-local fruits and vegetables, but they must label those products with their point of origin, according to Lou Ann Cedillo, president and secretary of the organization. "Local" products must be grown or made in Iowa or counties that border the state.

Cedillo said that she can tell the difference between local and non-local produce. "I've been in the business a long time, and I know when I'm looking at a shipped-in tomato" because of differences in appearance and texture, she said.

Ultimately, though, the system is based on trust. It's impossible for consumers to be certain of the origin of products at the markets.

## Finding Local Food

## Apples and Oranges: Comparing the Costs, Benefits, and Convenience of Organic and Local Produce

Written by Emily Heninger

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Despite the availability of farmers' markets in the Quad Cities, most people still buy their food primarily at grocery stores.

Many grocery stores carry local produce. Local Hy-Vee stores carry seasonal local produce, including sweet corn, zucchini, yellow squash, and tomatoes, according to Joe Stoltz, produce manager at the 53rd Street store in Davenport.

Each Hy-Vee store makes independent buying decisions, with the amount and type of local produce varying from location to location, according to Chris Friesleben, the company's director of communications. According to Stoltz, though, most Hy-Vees in the Quad Cities area carry local produce.

But it's often difficult to identify local produce because of poor signage.

Stoltz said that his store's local produce comes from areas near the Quad Cities, including Coal Valley, Blue Grass, and Milan. However, while the 53rd Street location has a section for locally grown food near the front of the store, it is unclear where most products come from; signs indicate "Product of the United States" rather than specifying from where the product came. The exceptions were tomatoes labeled as "Ineichen's Tomatoes," although the location of the farm - Blue Grass, Iowa - was left off.

Rich Walters, produce manager at the Avenue of the Cities Hy-Vee location in Moline, said that his store carries local products similar to those at the 53rd Street location, along with apples and melons in the fall. Walters said that "if the opportunity arises," he will label that produce as "local" or with the name of the farm, but the products are usually labeled more generally and placed next to non-local products.

Buy Fresh Buy Local Quad Cities has helped area farmers get their products into local stores including Hy-Vee, Fareway, and Greatest Grains.

Lafrenz said she is happy to see local foods in stores but wishes groceries would label the produce more specifically.

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The local chapter of Buy Fresh Buy Local began nearly five years ago to promote farmer-consumer connections. (See ["Food for Thought ... and Action," River Cities' Reader Issue 534, June 21, 2005](#).)

Buy Fresh Buy Local aims to "put a face on farming," said Lafrenz. "If you know your farmer, you know your food."

"It is making a relationship," said Joe Dennis of Nostalgia Farms, located on the outskirts of the Quad Cities near Maysville, Iowa. "You have to know who you're buying your produce from."

The Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign offers canning workshops, healthy-eating classes, instruction on packing "green" lunches for kids, and exercise programs.

It also distributes about 10,000 annual directories listing participating local farmers as well as ways to find local food in the community. Last year the directory had 19 grower entries, Lafrenz said, and 20 growers have joined since then. The directory is distributed by members at local markets and is also available digitally at the organization's Web site ( [BFBLQC.org](http://BFBLQC.org) ).

## The Organic Trend



One issue with locally grown produce is that the consumer doesn't know *how* it was grown. For that reason, said Lori Pennington, co-owner of Heritage Natural Foods in Moline and Davenport, organic is the only reliable option if you are looking to buy products grown with few chemicals. "Without it being certified, you don't know," she said.

In 2008, sales of organic food grew 17.1 percent, according to the Organic Trade Association, with organics accounting for approximately 3.5 percent of all food sales in the United States by the end of the year.

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A major reason people choose organic food is that they think it's healthier.

A 2006 paper published in *The Journal of Agricultural & Food Chemistry* found that organically grown tomatoes contained significantly more vitamin C than their conventionally grown counterparts.

A 2007 study at Newcastle University in the U.K. found that organic fruits and vegetables contained more than 60 percent more antioxidants and healthy fatty acids than conventional fruits and vegetables.

On the other hand, a survey of existing research published in July by the U.K.'s Food Standards Agency concluded: "There is no evidence of a difference in nutrient quality between organically and conventionally produced foodstuffs."

In the online magazine *Slate*, James E. McWilliams [said](#) earlier this month that the organic/conventional debate is ultimately useless right now because the science is so inconclusive. He wrote that the "maddeningly mixed results" about the nutritional value of organic food "allow consumers to cherry-pick whatever data support their preconceived notions."

Many argue that the real issue is not nutrition but chemical content. Marion Nestle, an expert on nutrition and food studies at New York University, said in a recent interview with *MedPage Today*

"Organics aren't about nutrients. They are about cleaner and more sustainable production methods," including "lower levels of pesticides and herbicides, which seems like a good idea."

Organic food, by definition, is grown with few chemicals - pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides - as dictated by the United States Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program. Because organics contain significantly fewer chemicals than conventionally grown foods, they could help prevent health problems that result from prolonged chemical consumption, including birth defects, nerve damage, and cancer, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Growing with fewer synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides also

results in less chemical contamination of waterways and aquifers.

Note, however, that organic food is grown with *minimal* chemicals. Contrary to popular belief, some synthetic products are still allowed on organic products, such as copper and magnesium sulfates. (For a full list of allowed substances, visit [AMS.USDA.gov/AMSV1.0/nop](http://AMS.USDA.gov/AMSV1.0/nop) .)

### Questioning Organic

But organic food is often more expensive. Earlier this month at a Bettendorf Hy-Vee, 14 of 15 organic fruits and vegetables we checked were more expensive than their conventionally grown counterparts. (See [sidebar](#) .) Organic cucumbers were more than three times as expensive as non-organic.

But buying organic doesn't necessarily mean emptying your wallet, one local store owner said. "You could buy expensive organic products, or you could buy less expensive products," said Julie Martens, owner of the local health-foods market Greatest Grains. "If you want to buy organic blackberries, it's going to hit your pocket. But if you want organic apples, not so much. ... I think there's room in the organic spectrum to stay on the higher end or lower end, whichever you want to do."

Some critics have also begun to highlight the environmental cost of purchasing organic produce instead of locally grown equivalents.

The most direct issue is a matter of distance traveled - or "food miles." Hy-Vee's organic produce includes strawberries, apples, mangoes, carrots, and cucumbers, much of it coming from California.

As author Gary Paul Nabhan asked in his 2002 memoir *Coming Home to Eat*, "If you send it halfway around the world before it is eaten, an organic food still may be 'good' for the consumer, but is it 'good' for the food system?"

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A 2007 study conducted at the University of Alberta found that organic food traveled nearly the same average distance as conventional food before reaching its final destination. In some cases, the distance was even longer, as in the case of organic mangoes from Ecuador and organic green peppers from Mexico. The researchers concluded that buying organic food was not much better than buying conventional food, as far as food miles go, and further recommended that buying local products whenever possible could reduce greenhouse-gas emissions produced by long-distance travel.

[Research from Iowa State University published in 2008](#) stated that a meal consisting of chuck roast, potatoes, carrots, and green beans could be found locally in Iowa at a collective distance of 90 miles - more than 5,000 miles fewer than if bought from conventional sources.

And growers at local farmers' markets said locally grown food simply tastes better. Rick Mess of Kurt's Green Acres in Davenport said that farmers' markets are important for their "fresh, high quality, homegrown" products.

Teresa Krause of Teresa's Tasty Produce in Atkinson, Illinois, said she had picked most of her table's produce that morning: "You know it's fresh."

*For a national overview of farmers' markets, family farms, and Community Supported Agriculture programs, visit [LocalHarvest.org](http://LocalHarvest.org).*

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## Local Farmers' Markets

### Mississippi Valley Growers' Association ( [MVGrowers.com](http://MVGrowers.com) )

*Bettendorf Farmers' Market*

May-October

Thursdays 2-6 p.m.

2117 State Street, Bettendorf

*Davenport Farmers' Market*

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May-October

Wednesdays and Saturdays 8 a.m.-noon

320 West Kimberly Road (eastern entrance of North Park Mall), Davenport

*Trinity Farmers' Market*

May-October

Mondays 3-6 p.m.

4500 Utica Ridge Road, Bettendorf

### **Quad Cities Farmers Market ( [QCFarmersMarket.com](http://QCFarmersMarket.com) )**

*East Moline Farmers' Market*

May-October

Wednesdays and Saturdays 8 a.m.-noon

1112 42nd Avenue, East Moline

*Milan Farmers' Market*

May-October

Wednesdays 2:30-5:30 p.m.

900 West Fourth Street, Milan

*Trinity Seventh Street Farmers' Market*

May-October

Saturdays 8 a.m.-noon

500 John Deere Road, Moline

### **Main Street Market ( [EastMoline.com/farmersmarket.cfm](http://EastMoline.com/farmersmarket.cfm) )**

April 30-October 29

Thursdays 2-6 p.m.

15th Avenue and Seventh Street, East Moline

### **Davenport Freight House Farmers' Market ( [FreightHouseFarmersMarket.com](http://FreightHouseFarmersMarket.com) )**

Year-round

Tuesdays 3-6 p.m., Saturdays 8 a.m.-1 p.m.

421 West River Drive, Davenport

### **River City Market Association ( [DavenportFarmersMarket.com](http://DavenportFarmersMarket.com) )**

May-October

Wednesdays and Saturdays 8 a.m.-noon

320 West Kimberly Road (eastern entrance of North Park Mall), Davenport

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## Organic Versus Conventional: A Price Comparison

The *River Cities' Reader* recently compared the prices of organic and conventional produce.

<b>Product</b>	<b>Organic Price</b>	<b>Conventional Price</b>
Apples (Golden Delicious)	\$1.69/lb.	\$1.89/lb.
Bananas	\$0.79/lb.	\$0.59/lb.
Blackberries	\$3.48/6 oz.	\$1.88/5.6 oz.
Blueberries	\$3.69/6 oz.	\$1.85/pint
Carrots	\$1.19/lb.	\$0.89/lb.
Cucumber	\$2.15 each	\$0.59 each
Grape tomatoes	\$4.69/pint	\$2.69/pint
Green Pepper	\$1.99 each	\$0.89 each
Iceberg Lettuce	\$1.48/head	\$0.77/head
Mango	\$2.99 each	\$0.89 each
Oranges	\$1.25/lb.	\$0.99/lb.
Peaches	\$2.99/lb.	\$2.29/lb.
Pineapple (whole)	\$4.99 each	\$3.99 each
Raspberries	\$3.69/6 oz.	\$1.88/6 oz.
Strawberries	\$2.99/lb.	\$1.88/lb.

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