



*A Toolkit to Take Action*

# **BUILDING A BETTER LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM**



**SUSTAINABLE**  
— A M E R I C A —

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# INTRODUCTION

When we think about food, we most often think in terms of eating. What will I have for lunch? Which recipe should I try? When should we eat tonight? Should we order takeout?

The food we eat exists on a spectrum. Supermarkets may appear limitless in scope, but in reality only offer a fraction of the true variety that exists due to freshness, distribution, budget and marketing concerns. In the race to feed millions of Americans, local producers and the foods they make regularly get left by the wayside.

Local food has the power not only to nourish, but to connect and energize the people within our communities. It has the ability to empower people to make a living, to learn new skills, to connect with the people around them, to become advocates and activists, to explore new ingredients, flavors and tastes.

This toolkit serves as a starter guide for fostering a stronger local food system in the communities and regions we call home. Within you'll find ideas for acquiring local food and supporting local farmers, tips for growing and sharing food with your neighbors, and ways to make positive change for food businesses and producers in your area.

Together we can make a better, stronger local food system!





# INTRO TO FOOD SYSTEMS

## What is a Food System?

The term 'food system' is used to describe the network of parts that are required to grow, process, transport, store, sell and consume food. It's the journey our nutrition takes—from the beginning of its growth to its final resting place on our plates. Each and every choice we make when deciding what we eat has an effect on how our food systems operate.

## Industrial Food Systems

In the United States, we rely heavily on fossil fuels to produce, transport, and process our food. Throughout the nation, farms and grocery stores have consolidated over time, leaving the big decisions of our food system in the hands of very few people.

While the supermarket boom has strengthened food access for some, significant sustainability, reliability and health challenges exist because of it. According to the University of Michigan's Center for Sustainable Systems, "consolidation of farms, food processing operations, and distribution warehouses often increases distance between food sources and consumers." This leaves our vulnerable populations in food deserts (areas with limited access to quality, affordable fresh foods), in a country that wastes a large amount of the food it produces.



**According to the EPA, approximately 31% of the U.S. food supply was lost or wasted in 2010 alone, a fifty percent increase over the amount lost in 1970.**





# INTRO TO FOOD SYSTEMS

## Industrial Food Systems Cont.

Many people are working hard to change this. Although it's not easy in the U.S., more people are starting smaller scale family farms. People are working to find ways to sell their produce directly to families instead of through large organizations. More people are realizing that eating fresh locally grown food is better for their health and for the environment.

### Industrial Food Systems - Pros & Cons

#### **PROS**

We can have (nearly) whatever we want, whenever we want it

Food production on a large scale leads to cheaper food overall

We produce a lot of food for significantly more people

#### **CONS**

Waste of energy: Food is shipped all over the country and world

Use of chemicals can pose challenges

- Food travels far before reaching us, requiring significant use of chemical preservatives to ensure a long shelf life
- Pesticides, herbicides and antibiotics are used to treat crops and animals for diseases and pests, but these chemicals can be unhealthy to humans if ingested

Local communities can be severely impacted by food supply chain challenges, with consolidated grocery stores potentially exacerbating issues



# INTRO TO FOOD SYSTEMS

## Local Food Systems

Local food systems encompass everything that larger systems do (growing, processing, transporting, storing, selling and consuming), just on a significantly smaller scale. That smaller scale is one of the key things that makes local food systems more sustainable, requiring fewer systems and less planning to get fresh food to the people who want it. Not only that, but participating in a local food system more directly benefits the people producing the food, leading to greater financial stability for individuals and communities.

### Local Food Systems - Pros & Cons

#### **PROS**

Healthier foods: produce grown and sourced locally is usually fresher because it's picked at the peak of ripeness

Foods are often treated with fewer or no chemicals and are less processed

More specialty foods and varieties

Supports local businesses, workers and economies

Provides a greater sense of community

Opportunities to increase and strengthen access

Can be more flexible and reliable during crisis

#### **CONS**

Foods can sometimes cost more than their mass-produced supermarket counterparts

System success directly dependent on community engagement





## U.S. Food System Fact Sheet from the University of Michigan

[css.umich.edu/sites/default/files/Food%20System\\_CSS01-06\\_e2019.pdf](https://css.umich.edu/sites/default/files/Food%20System_CSS01-06_e2019.pdf)

Facts, figures and insights for understanding our food system at a glance.

## A Framework for Assessing Effects of the Food System (National Academy of Sciences)

[ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK305181/](https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK305181/)

In-depth, edited research study that takes a deep dive into the U.S. Food System, and the effects it has on health, the environment, society and the economy.

## Environmental Cost of Shipping Groceries Around the World

[nytimes.com/2008/04/26/business/worldbusiness/26food.html](https://nytimes.com/2008/04/26/business/worldbusiness/26food.html)

This 2008 report reflects on the costs of a global logistical system for food.

## Local Food Systems: Concepts, Impacts, and Issues

[ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/46393/7054\\_err97\\_1.pdf](https://ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/46393/7054_err97_1.pdf)

The USDA's 2010 report explores local food system throughout America, including factors for success and challenges they face.







# SUPPORTING YOUR LOCAL SYSTEM

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# SHOP AT A FARMERS MARKET

*The easiest way to support your local food system—including the farmers, producers and food businesses involved in your area—is to buy local foods as often as possible. Below are a few of the most common ways to get started.*

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## **Shop at a Farmers Market**

One of the easiest ways to support local food systems is also one of the most common: by shopping at farmer's markets.

Farmers markets represent the epitome of the local food system. Each market is filled with produce and products harvested at the height of freshness, meaning that many of the fruits and vegetables will often taste better and retain more nutrients than counterparts purchased from a chain grocer that needed to travel many miles before reaching store shelves.

True to their name, farmers markets directly benefit local farmers and producers by giving them opportunities to sell their products in a cost-effective retail environment benefiting their schedules. Farmers markets allow these growers to make or add to their living, contributing to the success of their farm and serving as a way of saving dedicated farmland nationwide.

For some farmers, these sales allow them to earn significantly more money than would be paid to them by selling their yields to larger distributors. Those earnings can keep a farmer's business successful and allow them to maintain their growing spaces within their area.

Farmers markets also serve as important anchors for community-building, representing an important way to meet local producers, like-minded foodies and shoppers, and become involved in further strengthening a local food system.



# SHOP AT A FARMERS MARKET

## Finding A Market Near You

With nearly 9,000 farmers markets across the country according to the USDA, finding a market close to home is a fairly simple endeavor.

### *Search the Internet*

Using a search engine like Google or a social platform like Facebook can usually return results of markets near you.

### *Explore the National Farmers Market Directory*

Managed by the USDA, this [national directory](#) is fully searchable not only by location, but by payment method and available products, too.

### *Ask Your Neighbors*

Sometimes the best way to find a farmers market is to ask around—you may find your new favorite just by connecting with those around you!

You can find many details about specific vendors or types of products available on each market's website.



## DON'T HAVE A FARMERS MARKET? TRY STARTING ONE!

The Farmers Market Coalition ([farmersmarketcoalition.org](#)) offers plenty of resources and steps to begin a farmers market in your area, including a [detailed downloadable guide](#) originally prepared by the Texas Department of Agriculture.



**EXPLORE MORE RESOURCES: *Shop at a Farmers Market* - Page 15**



## JOINING A CSA

### Joining a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Program

For nearly a century, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs have been a popular way to get fresh food directly from a farmer or groups of farmers. CSAs offer a unique model compared to a farmers market or other retail-based buying. Rather than pick and buy produce at a market, customers pay ahead of time for a year's membership to a local farmer or farming cooperative's CSA, providing them with a box or collection of fresh produce at certain intervals determined by their membership. Depending on the CSA, you can often choose what types of foods you'd like to receive and how much you'd receive at certain intervals.

CSAs are important because they provide farmers with an income when they need it the most: ahead of the growing season when they need to purchase supplies and seed and put in the work long before the harvest is ready. It allows farmers to better budget and plan so they know how much food to plant and when to plant it by having dedicated customers to whom they're providing food.

CSAs also offer opportunities to build community. They allow individuals to get to know their farmers and where their food is coming from. Friends and family members can go in on a CSA membership together and share in the harvest from their farmer(s). And some CSAs even provide an opportunity to engage with other members through food pickups, events and volunteer opportunities, making them a true anchor of building a local food system.



Photo Credits: [Irv & Shelly's Fresh Picks](#)

## JOINING A CSA

### Getting Started with a CSA

One of the best ways to get started with a CSA is to start with a simple internet search for CSAs in the city or region in which you live or by reaching out to local environmental organizations about CSA programs in your area. The USDA also offers a searchable [\*directory of CSAs\*](#) throughout the U.S.

Remember that all CSA programs are different and it's good to do some research on a few before making a decision to ensure you're choosing one that is the best fit for you and your lifestyle. You wouldn't want to sign up for a CSA and let that good food go to waste! As you're doing research, you may also consider going in on a CSA membership with a family member or friend—both as a way of splitting the cost and in case you can't take use all of your produce during a given harvest box period. Some CSAs also offer volunteer opportunities to help reduce costs for individuals and other members.

While CSAs often have a high membership cost due to paying for an entire season's worth of produce up front, they represent one of the most sustainable, and most impactful, ways you can contribute to a stronger local food system.



**EXPLORE RESOURCES:** *Join a CSA – Page 15*



## BUY FROM FOOD HUBS & AGGREGATORS

### Buy from Food Hubs & Aggregators

Closely related to CSA groups and programs are food hubs and aggregators, organizations that assist small farms and producers in the distribution, marketing and sale of fresh produce and products. Food hubs and aggregators can come in many shapes and sizes—some may have a physical presence for shopping while others may be remote or online-only—but all are concerned with connecting the dots between producers and consumers and fostering a stronger local food network.

In addition to selling wholesale to restaurants and other businesses, many food hubs sell curated subscription boxes or bags to consumers, usually with home delivery or local pick-up. These subscriptions can be as simple as offering a dairy, produce or protein subscription like east coast-based [4P Foods](#) does to its customers, while others can be more specialized, focused around a specific nutritional diet or food preference. Many food hubs and aggregators even allow for individual purchases of fresh food and products, like [Irv & Shelly's Fresh Picks](#) based in northern Illinois that offer everything from bagels to beets to beef roasts a la carte. Some specialized aggregators even allow you to browse and purchase products from individual producers.

Depending on where you live, finding a food hub or local food aggregator can be tricky. The USDA's searchable [food hub database](#) is a great place to start. And even if there isn't a hub aggregating food near you, there's likely still an opportunity to acquire fresh food from local producers in your area.



**EXPLORE MORE RESOURCES: [Buy From Food Hubs & Aggregators](#) – Page 16**

# BUY DIRECT FROM THE FARM

## Buy Direct from the Farm

While CSAs, food hubs and farmer's markets are among the most common ways you can support farmers and food producers, another viable option is connecting with and buying directly from a farmer or producer. Similar to how some restaurants purchase ingredients from local farms to craft the items on their menus, opportunities exist for individuals and community groups to also connect with farmers and producers to buy directly from them outside of a typical CSA.

The best way to find local farms and producers who are willing to sell directly is often by visiting a farmer's market. Introducing yourself, creating a dialogue and buying from them can sometimes lead to an opportunity to discuss buying directly from them outside of the farmer's market setting.

Many restaurants that specialize in locally-sourced ingredients often name producers and providers on their menus; keeping a running note and doing the homework to research them as a producer is another good way to start.

You can also use the internet. Websites like [Local Harvest](#) and [EatWild](#) have directories and descriptions of locally-owned farms across the nation, while the USDA also has a searchable [directory of on-farm markets](#), locations owned and managed by single-farm operators who wish to sell products directly to consumers.

## Getting Your Neighbors Involved

Buying directly from a farmer is an important way to support your local food system on an individual or household level, but buying directly also represents an opportunity to get your neighbors involved and amplify the impact to your local producers and strengthen your community.

One way to do this is to organize a "group buy" among neighbors to buy larger quantities of fresh produce or products from selected farmers or producers, then distribute among the neighbors who participate. A great way to start organizing a neighborhood food buy is by going door to door with a sign-up sheet or by leaving a pledge form that can be returned to you. provided a printable template at the end of this toolkit so you can go out, ask your neighbors and start buying farm-fresh foods together.



**EXPLORE MORE RESOURCES : Buy Direct from the Farm – Page 16**



## SHOP AT A FARMERS MARKET

### USDA National Farmers Market Directory

[ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets](https://ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets)

A searchable database for finding a farmers market near you.

### Farmers Market Coalition

[farmersmarketcoalition.org](https://farmersmarketcoalition.org)

Educational resources and guides for farmers market organizers.

### How to Start a Farmers Market

[farmersmarketcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FarmersMarketGuide-online\\_version\\_lo-res.pdf](https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FarmersMarketGuide-online_version_lo-res.pdf)

An in-depth guide to launching a market in your area, originally prepared by the Texas Department of Agriculture.

### How to Run a Farmers Market

[mass.gov/guides/how-to-run-a-farmers-market](https://mass.gov/guides/how-to-run-a-farmers-market)

A great digital guide on launching a farmers market in your community with sample checklists and registration forms prepared by the state of Massachusetts.

## JOINING A COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA) PROGRAM

### USDA National Farmers Market Directory

[ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets](https://ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets)

A searchable database for finding a farmers market near you.

### How to Choose a CSA

[localharvest.org/newsletter/20100223/choosing-a-csa.html](https://localharvest.org/newsletter/20100223/choosing-a-csa.html)

Local Harvest's beginner's guide for selecting a CSA that works for you.

### How to Eat Locally in Winter

[sustainableamerica.org/blog/how-to-eat-local-in-winter-infographic](https://sustainableamerica.org/blog/how-to-eat-local-in-winter-infographic)

A quick guide for ways you can eat local each winter, whether you are a member of a CSA or not!



## BUY FROM FOOD HUBS & AGGREGATORS

### USDA Food Hub Database

[ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/foodhubs](https://ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/foodhubs)

A searchable database for finding a food hub near you.

### What is a Food Hub?

[sustainableamerica.org/blog/what-is-a-food-hub](https://sustainableamerica.org/blog/what-is-a-food-hub)

Sustainable America's written and infographic primer on food hubs in the U.S.

### National Good Food Network

[ngfn.org](https://ngfn.org)

Benchmark studies and resources for food hub buyers and organizers.

## BUY DIRECT FROM THE FARM

### USDA On-Farm Market Database

[ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/onfarm](https://ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/onfarm)

A searchable database for finding farms that sell directly to consumers on their premises.

### Local Harvest Farm Directory

[localharvest.org/search.jsp?lat=0.0&lon=0.0&scale=9&ty=0](https://localharvest.org/search.jsp?lat=0.0&lon=0.0&scale=9&ty=0)

A directory of more than 15,000 farms throughout the United States.







## BUILDING YOUR OWN SYSTEM

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*Growing Your Own Food - The Food Gardening Basics*

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# GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD - THE FOOD GARDENING BASICS

*In addition to taking concrete actions to support local food producers, you can become a key part of strengthening local food systems by growing food yourself. Growing your own food can help lower your dependence on the industrial food system and can lead to long-lasting change in your kitchen and community alike!*

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## **Growing Your Own Food - The Food Gardening Basics**

Anyone who gardens or is friends with a gardener knows how much their green thumbs look forward to spring and early summer each and every year — often planning out their seeds, gardens and harvests months in advance.

As more and more people take up gardening for the first time this year, it's important to consider just how critical growing your own food can be to supporting a healthy local food system. From learning about the different heirloom varieties of produce (many of which aren't grown by industrial farms) to recognizing food as nourishment and not just fuel, gardening represents a big opportunity to expand your food awareness. Not only that, but growing your own food can help make you more self-sufficient as well as feed and inspire those around you.



### **Growing Indoors**

If your outdoor space is limited or you're new to gardening, it's relatively easy to get started growing your own food indoors. Herbs like basil, cilantro, sage, rosemary and others are easy starters that can grow in anything from an old soup can or a cup, all the way up to a dedicated pot. Taking up a small amount of space on a sunny windowsill or counter, herbs allow you to plant, use and repeat as needed with minimal watering and attention. Lettuces and arugula are also great indoor greens for beginners.

Most food-bearing plants prefer full sun, so spaces and rooms that get bright sunlight for most of the day will often yield the best results. For indoor gardeners without a lot of direct sunlight, grow lights can be a great supplement or replacement to allow your indoor plants to grow to their full potential. Grow lights can vary significantly in size, light type, strength and more. Modern Farmer has a [great guide](#) to the different types of grow lights and how to install them.

Hydroponic gardening is another popular option for indoor food growers. Using water and nutrients rather than soil, hydroponic gardens can grow many types of food in spaces ranging from small jars to larger reservoirs and systems. One of our favorite resources for hydroponic gardening is from the blog [Smart Garden Guide](#), where you can learn about different types of hydroponic systems and get started on your own. Purdue University also offers a [detailed list of links](#) to hydroponic growing guides and information from other universities.





## Growing Outdoors

Growing your own food outdoors is great because as the amount of garden space increases, the amount of food you can grow and enjoy also increases. With enough care and planning, you can grow foods that can make your meals fresher and more delicious.

Having a fruitful yield in an outdoor garden is a function of light, timing and space. Partial or full sun for four hours or more is important in growing many vegetables and edible plants, though there are ways to adapt to a shadier gardening area (mainly selecting specific foods or varieties). When growing plants outdoors, it is important to consider the timing of when to plant your seeds or starter plants. Snap peas, for example, are happy in the early spring and won't die if there's a light frost, but if you were to plant tomato plants too early in the season and temperatures dropped below freezing for one night, you may need to start over. Each and every plant will vary, so it's important to do a bit of planning prior to buying a bunch of seeds and sticking them in the soil.

While space can often be seen as a constraint or a limiter, there are plenty of different ways to leverage the space you have and what you want to grow. Planting areas against fences and walls are great for tomatoes or other vine veggies, while long flat beds or planters can yield just about anything you want to eat as long as your sunlight, timing and climate constraints allow.

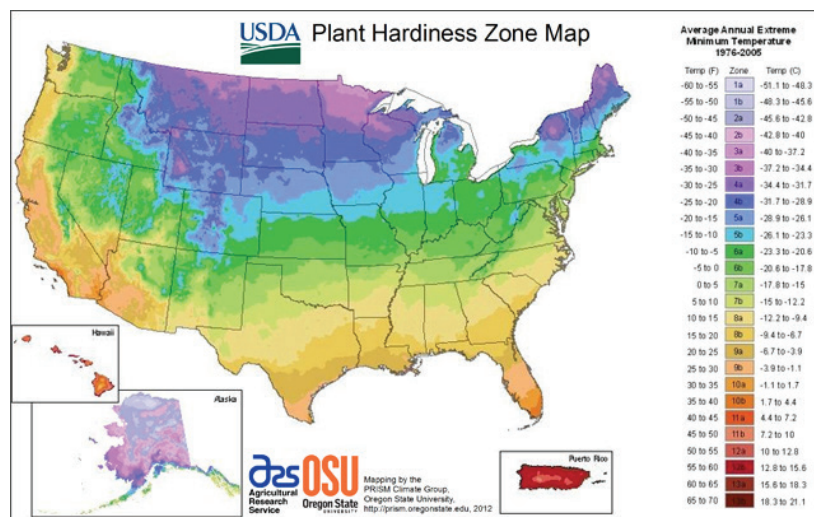
## Zones for Outdoor Vegetables

Each and every plant grows differently based upon a certain set of conditions, climate being one of them. To assist in farming and helping gardeners determine which plants will thrive in specific areas (and survive winter seasons), the USDA developed the [plant hardiness zones and zone map](#). Split into 13, two-stage growing zones, the map offers a general guide of what to plant in each zone.



### CHECK THIS OUT!

The hardiness zone map is the gold standard for gardeners and growers when determining if plants are right for their climate (specifically if they can survive the winters in a given location).



## Produce Varieties

For many gardeners, the sheer variety of seeds, plants and vegetables is where the most passion lies in gardening and growing food. The produce we see in our grocery stores is a limited view of the different varieties of fruits and vegetables that exist in the world, with hundreds of different seed types and variables affecting the growth, color, texture and overall taste of what's harvested.

We experience this most commonly with apples. Granny Smith, Gala, Fuji and Honeycrisp apples all look and taste different. The same is true for other plants and vegetables, too. Many gardeners choose to plant truly unique or [“heirloom” varieties](#), which are varieties of plants and seeds whose heritage and genetic makeup can be traced through generations.

Seed companies, greenhouses and farmers can often provide insight into what makes one variety different from another, both in how it tastes and how it grows. For gardeners and food growers of all skill levels, exploring and experimenting is part of the fun!



### BECOME AN HEIRLOOM SEED EXPLORER!

Here are a few of our favorite places to find varietal seeds.

**Seed Savers Exchange:**  
[seedsaversexchange.org](http://seedsaversexchange.org)

**Pine Tree Seeds:**  
[superseeds.com](http://superseeds.com)

**Johnny's Selected Seeds:**  
[johnnyseeds.com](http://johnnyseeds.com)

**Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds:**  
[rareseeds.com](http://rareseeds.com)

**Fedco Seeds:**  
[fedcoseeds.com](http://fedcoseeds.com)

**Renee's Garden:**  
[reneesgarden.com](http://reneesgarden.com)





## Close the Loop With Composting

Composting is a great component to add into a gardening plan, whether you're growing indoors or outdoors. Compost allows your food scraps, weeds, fallen leaves and dead plants to become nutrient-rich fuel for your garden. With a wide variety of different methods for outdoor and indoor spaces alike, composting is an easy way to take your food garden further. Explore a few of Sustainable America's composting resources in the inset below.

## Building an Outdoor Planter or Raised Garden Bed

Many first-time gardeners are intimidated when it comes to building or installing an outdoor garden bed or planter for their vegetables, often asking themselves which shape is best or how big it should be. Fortunately, gardening outdoors offers a lot of flexibility—as long as your planter can hold dirt and drain water, it will likely work for growing food.

Pre-made planters can be made of a variety of materials, from wood or stone to metal or plastic. Other planter-friendly materials include terracotta, the porous orange clay-based ceramic; hypertufa, a man-made porous rock formed by minerals and cement; and even felt fabric.

By far the most intense part of getting your planter or bed built is acquiring and transporting the soil needed to fill it. You can buy bags of compost and topsoil at garden centers and home improvement stores a la carte, but depending on your budget and the size of your planters, getting soil delivered to your garden can be more time and cost effective.



### GUIDES TO BECOME A BETTER COMPOSTER

#### How To Compost in Your Apartment

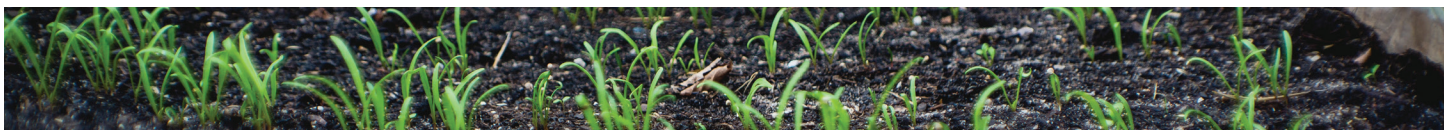
[sustainableamerica.org/blog/how-to-compost-in-your-apartment](https://sustainableamerica.org/blog/how-to-compost-in-your-apartment)

#### A Guide to Bokashi Composting:

[sustainableamerica.org/blog/bokashi-composting](https://sustainableamerica.org/blog/bokashi-composting)

#### "I Want to Compost, But..." Easy Answers for Getting Started Composting:

[sustainableamerica.org/blog/i-want-to-compost-but](https://sustainableamerica.org/blog/i-want-to-compost-but)



### Building a Raised Garden Bed Out of Wood

When it comes to building your own raised bed, wood is typically the most common option—but again comes with its own set of decisions around which type of wood to use. If you're thinking of going this route, you'll want to choose a wood that's naturally resistant to decay. Cedar is most common, but can be expensive. Other options include Douglas Fir and White Oak. Avoid treated lumber from home improvement stores and lumber yards as the chemicals used to prevent rot could transfer into your soil and then into your foods. According to [Garden.org](https://www.garden.org), be on the lookout for, Cedar (Eastern or Western red), Chestnut, White Oak, Redwood, Cypress, Larch, Old-growth Pine (Longleaf & Slash) as they are among the most resilient woods for planters.



An internet or YouTube search will reveal thousands of different planter build options and how-to guides. Here is one detailed build guide and two roundup articles to get started.

#### WikiHow

[\*How To Build Raised Vegetable Boxes\*](#)

#### The Spruce

[\*10 Free Raised Planter Box Plans:\*](#)

#### The Garden Glove

[\*DIY Raised Garden Beds & Planter Boxes:\*](#)



#### EXPLORE MORE RESOURCES:

[\*Growing Your Own Food - The Food Gardening Basics – Page 26\*](#)



## GROWING WITH NEIGHBORS — A HYPERLOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

*Not only is growing your own food a great hobby and way to provide your household with fresh and healthy produce, it's also a great way to connect with neighbors and build a strong, sharing-based hyperlocal food system.*

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### Growing Together — Sharing & Splitting Efforts

While connecting with neighbors can be intimidating for some, growing food and gardening can be a great way to break the ice.

You can go door-to-door and let your neighbors know that you're growing food and that you'd be willing to share or swap if they're interested. If you're the organizational type, you can even create a small gardening club among your neighbors, connecting in person or via a private Facebook group, email or text message thread to discuss what you're planting, how things are growing and if you'd be willing to trade or share. Neighborhood gardening exchanges like these may already exist, so be sure to ask around or do a few Facebook searches before trying to start your own.

If connecting with neighbors in person seems intimidating, Sustainable America's Shared Earth platform can help connect you with other gardeners and farmers in your area. The website acts as a resource for connecting people who wish to grow food with people who have land or tools to lend. With more than 14,500 users nationwide, Shared Earth is a great opportunity to get to know people and collaborate on growing food together.



Visit [Shared Earth](#) to get to know fellow gardeners, share land and tools and start growing food together!



# Shared Earth

## GROWING WITH NEIGHBORS — A HYPERLOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

### Growing Together — Sharing & Splitting Efforts Cont.

Another popular avenue for gardening with neighbors is through community gardens where neighbors can come together on rented, shared or public land to grow food. Like CSAs, community gardens function a little differently based on who is gardening and the municipality in which the garden is located, so it's best to do a bit of research. The American Community Gardening Association has a [searchable database and map](#) of community gardens across the nation, while doing an internet search for "community gardens near me" will often display results and information for your area.

No matter how you do it, one of the biggest benefits of growing food and gardening as a community is the ability to share and trade your harvests with your neighbors. As a way of helping jumpstart the sharing of your bounty, we've designed some printable signs to place in your yard or window to inform your neighbors in the appendix of this toolkit.



**VIEW PAGE 33 TO EXPLORE OUR PRINTABLE MATERIALS TO GET YOUR NEIGHBORS INVOLVED!**

#### **Farm Buying Sign-up Sheet — Page 35**

Go door-to-door and sign-up your neighbors to organize a group farm buy!

#### **Farm Buying Leave-Behinds — Page 36**

Miss your neighbors on a door-to-door sign-up? Leave behind one of these handy notes to have them contact you.

#### **Community Food Sharing Yard/Window Signs — Page 37**

Let your neighbors know you're looking to share or trade your produce with a printable sign for your window or yard!



# GROWING WITH NEIGHBORS — A HYPERLOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

## Giving & Donating Your Surplus

If you'd like to go one step further with your surplus food, you can reach out to food banks, community shelters, church groups and local nonprofit organizations to see if they would accept donations of fresh produce. Depending on how much food you and your neighbors grow, you could end up helping the people in your community who need it most!



## ROB GREENFIELD'S TIPS FOR GARDENING ON YOUR NEIGHBOR'S LAND

In 2019 we spoke with environmental activist and humanitarian Rob Greenfield about his “Food Freedom” project in which he only ate food he grew or foraged—the majority of which he grew in the yards and gardens of his neighbors. Here are three key takeaways from Rob related to shared gardening on your neighbors land.

### ***Approach it with a service attitude:***

How can you meet the needs of your neighbors and community with what you plant?

### ***Make the garden visible:***

Front yard gardens and signage can encourage your community to work together

### ***Give back more than you take:***

Whether you're sharing your harvest, giving gardening tips or lending tools, it's important to show gratitude and give back to your neighbors

Read the full story and explore his tips on our [blog](#).



## EXPLORE MORE RESOURCES:

[\*Growing With Neighbors - A Hyperlocal Food System – Page 27\*](#)

## GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD - THE FOOD GARDENING BASICS

### Grow Where You Are

[sustainableamerica.org/blog/infographic-grow-where-you-are](https://sustainableamerica.org/blog/infographic-grow-where-you-are)

Sustainable America's quick illustrated guide to growing your own and the benefits of doing so

### USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map

[planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb](https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb)

The 2012 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map is the standard by which gardeners and growers can determine which plants are most likely to thrive in a given area.

### How to be a Backyard Carbon Farmer

[sustainableamerica.org/blog/how-to-be-a-backyard-carbon-farmer](https://sustainableamerica.org/blog/how-to-be-a-backyard-carbon-farmer)

A wonderful guide from Sustainable America contributor Acadia Tucker on making a backyard garden that's good for food and the environment.

### Grow Lights for Indoor Plants and Indoor Gardening: An Overview

[modernfarmer.com/2018/03/grow-lights-for-indoor-plants-and-indoor-gardening](https://modernfarmer.com/2018/03/grow-lights-for-indoor-plants-and-indoor-gardening)

Modern Farmer explores various lights for indoor growing in this overview.

### Getting Started in Hydroponics – A Beginner's Guide

[smartgardenguide.com/getting-started-in-hydroponics](https://smartgardenguide.com/getting-started-in-hydroponics)

A detailed overview on hydroponic gardening from the Smart Garden Guide blog.





### GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD - A HYPERLOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

#### American Community Gardening Association

[communitygarden.org](http://communitygarden.org)

Nonprofit that supports community gardening by facilitating the formation and expansion of community gardening networks, developing resources, encouraging research, and conducting educational programs.

#### Why You Should Grow a Front Yard Veggie Garden

[sustainableamerica.org/blog/why-you-should-plant-a-front-yard-veggie-garden](http://sustainableamerica.org/blog/why-you-should-plant-a-front-yard-veggie-garden)

Sustainable America's quick-start guide to growing and collaborating with your neighbors on a front-yard vegetable garden.

#### RipeNearMe

[ripenear.me](http://ripenear.me)

This platform allows you to browse available produce (and list your own produce!) in your area.

#### Food Is Free

[foodisfreeproject.org](http://foodisfreeproject.org)

This worldwide project provides dozens of resources for organizing your community to create a collaborative gardening project.







## INVESTING IN GREATER CHANGE

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*Investing & Providing Financial Support* 29

*Advocating for Local Foods* 32



# INVESTING & PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

*There's no doubt that buying from farmers markets and getting involved in CSAs and food hubs is a great way to support local producers and contribute to your local food system. But for those who want to do even more to build more robust and resilient systems within their communities, there are plenty of ways to invest in change beyond the grocery budget. By making financial investments in or advocating in support of local food businesses, you can be part of creating substantial change in your community and beyond.*

## Investing & Providing Financial Support

Chances are high that many farms and food businesses in your area are in need of investment to scale up to the next level. Maybe the producers in your area are constrained by a lack of infrastructure, like processing facilities or distribution services. There could be a new indoor farm in need of start-up funds or an aspiring organic farmer that needs help securing land.

As the demand for local food continues to grow, investing in this area may yield returns for you as well as your wider community. Food businesses contribute to local tax revenue, create jobs, benefit the local environment and strengthen community resiliency. The Fair Food Fund, the impact investing arm of [Fair Food Network](#), for example, estimates that every dollar they've invested in local food has generated nearly \$9 in community benefits.



## INVESTING AND PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The best way to get started is by getting to know the food system in your area and looking for opportunities that align with your values and how you'd like to affect change.

### Examples can include:

- Increasing food equity & access
- Creating employment opportunities
- Boosting regenerative agriculture
- Supporting land conservation
- And many more!



# INVESTING & PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

## Investing & Providing Financial Support Cont.

Once you've explored how you want to make a difference, you can start taking action by looking into different investment methods, a few of which we've outlined below.

### Crowdfunding

The popularity of crowdfunding has skyrocketed in recent years thanks to the success of rewards-based platforms like [Kickstarter](#) and [Indiegogo](#) and donation-based sites like [GoFundMe](#). These platforms make providing funding relatively easy, with location and category filtering options to help users find local food projects and fundraising campaigns in their area.

For food businesses specifically, there's a crowdfunding platform called [Credibles](#). Credibles is a rewards-based platform that lets local food lovers buy credit (think gift cards) from farmers and producers upfront to be redeemed for goods at a later date, with some local producers offering bonuses or accrued credit for purchases over a specific amount. Similar to CSA programs, upfront support programs like Credible allow these food businesses to fund their ongoing operations and strengthen relationships with customers.

For those looking to make larger investments in food businesses, there's [Localstake](#), a crowdfunding platform for local businesses seeking financial support in amounts between \$50,000 and \$500,000. The platform supports several investment structures and thoroughly vets the businesses, their proprietors and the business' credit before being publicly listed on the website. Successfully funded investments have included an Indiana butcher shop and local meat processor and a producer of sparkling fruit tonic made with local Michigan fruit.

Additional crowdfunding opportunities exist for accredited investors, including [Crowdfunder](#) for early-stage capital fundraising and [Harvest Returns](#), a firm that connects investors with opportunities of all types in agriculture, including vertical farms, hydroponic farms, and aquaculture, many of them small family operations.





## INVESTING & PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

### Slow Money

Perhaps no organization is more associated with local food investing than the [\*Slow Money Institute\*](#). Founded in 2008 by Woody Tasch, Slow Money was started around the concept of connecting investors to the communities they live in by supporting organic farms and local food businesses. Slow Money now has self-governing chapters around the country which take a variety of forms, including public meetings, on-farm events, pitch fests, peer-to-peer loans, investment clubs, and nonprofit clubs making 0% loans.

### Investment Funds

As an alternative to investing in a single farm or company, investment funds that focus on food and agriculture also exist, offering investors opportunities to affect change on a large scale.

#### [\*Farmland LP\*](#)

Buys industrial agricultural farmland and increases its value and its value to the environment by securing organic certification and supporting sustainable land management practices.

#### [\*The Fair Food Fund\*](#)

Provides catalytic capital and business assistance to local food businesses throughout the value chain that have an impact on social equity. They offer five- and 10-year notes to accredited investors that receive a modest return on investment.

#### [\*AgFunder\*](#)

Is a venture capital firm that invests in food and agriculture technologies. The fund is periodically open to new accredited investors.

Other investment funds exist for specific regions: [\*Local Farms Fund\*](#) is a community impact farmland investment fund in the New York foodshed that provides land security and a path to ownership for early-stage sustainable farmers. [\*Sustainable Local Food Investment Group \(SLoFIG\)\*](#) invests in start-up and early stage food companies in the Chicago foodshed.

To learn even more about investing in food and agriculture, visit [\*Invest With Values\*](#) and [\*Locavesting\*](#).



**EXPLORE MORE RESOURCES:**  
***Investing & Providing Financial Support - Page 34***

# ADVOCATING FOR LOCAL FOOD

## Advocating for Local Food

Sometimes the best way to affect change is to be part of making it happen. Whether you'd rather volunteer or work with local groups who strengthen systems or actively reach out to businesses, organizations and elected officials, there are plenty of ways to take part in improving your community's food system outside of the support that comes from the kitchen.

## Educating Yourself on the Issues

There are a wide variety of factors that affect our food system on a national scale, many of which can also have a significant impact at the local level. From growing space and infrastructure that affects production capacity and distribution, to differing regulatory standards across federal, state, county and municipal jurisdictions, challenges likely exist for food producers near you.

One of the best ways to learn about specific incentives, issues, regulations and structures affecting your local food system is by speaking directly with the farmers and producers in your area. Ask them if there are any limitations to how they can produce or how they can offer their products for sale. Let them know you're invested in seeing local food businesses like theirs succeed and that you'd be willing to advocate on their behalf in addition to being a regular customer.

Following agricultural or municipal news through your local newspaper is another way to stay informed on what's happening in your area. Specialized news outlets and groups like [Civil Eats](#), [Modern Farmer](#) and [Food Tank](#) offer stories, case studies, insights and resources focused specifically on the food system—both locally and nationally. Sustainable America regularly covers food sustainability issues on our [blog](#) and curates food news as part of our [email newsletters](#). You can also sign-up to receive regular [email updates from the USDA](#).



### STAY UP-TO-DATE!

Civil Eats, Modern Farmer and Food Tank are three great resources for becoming an educated and empowered local food advocate!



modern farmer



foodtank  
THE FOOD THINK TANK



## ADVOCATING FOR LOCAL FOOD

### Getting Involved and Taking Action

There are plenty of opportunities to turn a passion for local food into concrete actions and advocacy that can strengthen your local food system. By getting involved as a volunteer or organizer for a local farmer's market, CSA or community group, you can strengthen relationships with farmers and producers and encourage community members to visit or join. As a member of a school board or other municipal group you can advocate for the purchase of foods from local producers as a way of fostering healthier eating habits and strengthening the local economy. You can even prepare education materials and urge local restaurant owners and chefs to source from local producers whenever possible.

Engaging with government and local officials is another great way to be an advocate for local food systems. Based on your research of issues and factors affecting your local food system, you can call or write officials at the municipal, county, state or federal level and ask that they support initiatives, building projects and legislation that strengthen local food. Websites like [OpenStates.org](https://openstates.org) and [GovTrack.us](https://govtrack.us) allow you to find your representatives and their view voting history, while municipal and county websites ending in .gov provide direct contact information for representatives in your area.



## INVESTING & PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

### The Fair Food Fund

[fairfoodnetwork.org/projects/fair-food-fund](http://fairfoodnetwork.org/projects/fair-food-fund)

The impact investing arm of the Fair Food Network, providing funding to food entrepreneurs since 2013.

### Credibles

[credibles.co](http://credibles.co)

A crowdfunding credit program specifically for supporting local farmers and food producers with upfront payments.

### Slow Money Institute

[slowmoney.org](http://slowmoney.org)

One of the most popular ways to fund local food businesses, with dozens of chapters across the country serving the needs of their local food communities.





# PRINTABLE RESOURCES

## Printable Resource Directions

The next four pages include resources for you to use to get started organizing and connecting with your neighbors about local food in your area.

To print them out without printing out the entire toolkit (and save paper!), select the print function or icon in your web browser or PDF application. In the pre-print dialog box, make sure to deselect "All" as the pages you wish to print and enter the page number(s) of the downloads you wish to print in the page range selector. Making the range **36-39** will print all four printable resources.

Best of luck in strengthening your local food system!

### Farm Buying Sign-up Sheet — Page 36

Go door-to-door and sign-up your neighbors to organize a group farm buy!

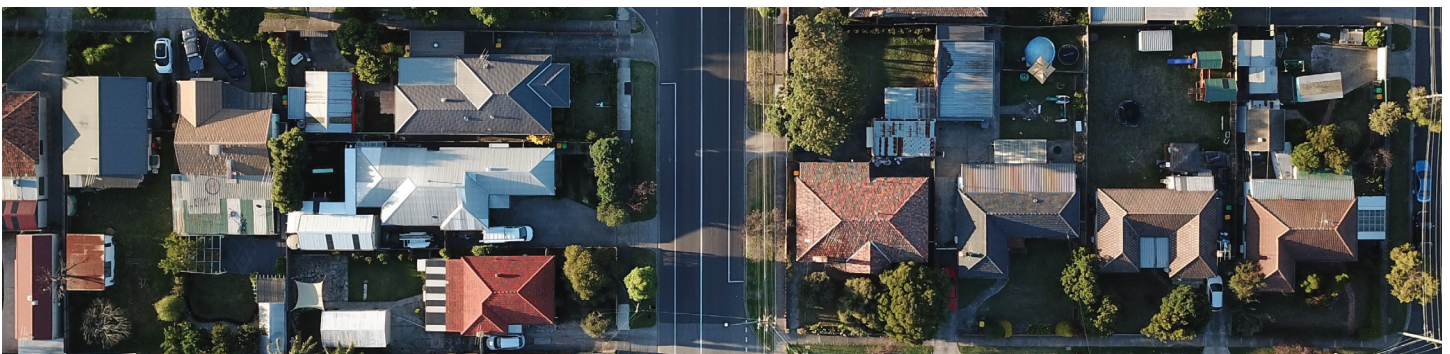
### Farm Buying Leave-Behinds — Page 37

Miss your neighbors on a door-to-door sign-up? Leave behind one of these handy notes to have them contact you.

### Community Food Sharing Yard/Window Signs — Pages 38-39

Let your neighbors know you're looking to share or trade your produce with a printable sign for your window or yard!

## PRINTABLE RESOURCE DIRECTIONS





# FARM BUY INTEREST

## Sign-up Sheet

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### Hi neighbor!

I'm looking for others to join me in buying produce / meat / dairy / eggs from our local farmers. I'd like to support our local farmers, our neighborhood and our local economy by sourcing as much food as possible locally. Going in on this together will allow all of us to get the freshest, highest quality food possible, support our community and keep costs low for everyone. If you're interested in joining me in this, please sign up below.

Once you're signed up, I'll be in touch shortly about organizing a neighborhood food buy. Thank you!

NAME	ADDRESS	PHONE #	EMAIL	DESCRIPTION OF INTEREST





# FARM BUY INTEREST

Miss your neighbors on a door-to-door sign-up? Leave behind one of these handy notes to have them contact you.



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If you're interested in joining me in this, please sign up below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name Phone # Email*

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[sustainableamerica.org/localfood](https://sustainableamerica.org/localfood)

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If you're interested in joining me in this, please sign up below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name Phone # Email*

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[sustainableamerica.org/localfood](https://sustainableamerica.org/localfood)



COMMUNITY FOOD SHARING

**HEY NEIGHBORS!**

**I GREW EXTRA:**

---

**LOOKING TO TRADE FOR:**

---

**ADDRESS:**

---

**PHONE:**

---



**SUSTAINABLE**  
— A M E R I C A —

*[sustainableamerica.org/localfood](http://sustainableamerica.org/localfood)*





COMMUNITY FOOD SHARING

**HEY NEIGHBORS!**

**I GREW EXTRA:**

---

**FREE! LET ME KNOW IF YOU WANT SOME.**

**ADDRESS:**

---

**PHONE:**

---



**SUSTAINABLE**  
— A M E R I C A —

*[sustainableamerica.org/localfood](http://sustainableamerica.org/localfood)*