

group also holds periodic statewide and regional trainings.

According to VT FEED coordinator Dana Hudson, getting students involved is the key to making farm-to-school programs work. "If students participate in growing, preparing, and especially serving meals, it really accelerates the acceptance, and we have almost full participation in trying them. Even something as simple as getting to know the farmer supplying the food makes kids much more likely to eat it," she says.<sup>10</sup>

VT FEED has come up with innovative ideas for making the most of seasonal produce. For late fall and winter, when locally grown lettuce is unavailable, they've designed salads that can be made from cold-storage crops such as cabbage, carrots, potatoes, and apples. Kale, a hardy green vegetable that is ideally suited to the Vermont climate, is incorporated into many foods, such as minestrone soup, pesto, and even pizza sauce.

The Burlington, Vermont, school district has been especially creative in going both local and healthy with its pizza. Rather than depend on a national chain to supply cheese or pepperoni pizza, they found a local caterer to create veggie pizzas using whole-wheat flour from King Arthur, a Vermont company, and local kale in the sauce. The caterer ended up with a contract for the entire school district, and even worked with kids to make their own pizzas—again, connecting a face with the food.

VT FEED is looking to move to local sources of dairy and meat as well as fruits and vegetables, and is even working on getting Vermont products into the commodity stream of the US Department of Agriculture, as schools are allotted a certain amount of commodity funds. (Commodity foods are those purchased by the government to help support farm prices when there is a surplus of a certain product. The foods are distributed through various programs, including the National School Lunch Program.) Hudson also advises asking food distributors if they offer any local products. "Distributors don't always think to offer local products. Just by asking, you are helping to create demand."

### How to help your school get started

If your school doesn't have a farm-to-school program, the best way to start is by checking out the National Farm to School Program, at [www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org). The site offers many tools for evaluating the needs of your school and the resources available in your community. Director Anupama Joshi says the first step is finding out what needs to be changed. Assessment surveys for food services and local farmers can be downloaded from the website to find out what is realistic for your school district and community. Step two is to garner support. Joshi suggests a meeting to bring everyone together—school administrators,



Burlington Unified School District students show off peas they picked on a tour of an area farm.

parents, food-service directors, teachers—to create a feasible plan for your program. She stresses the importance of getting food services and the school administration to buy into the idea of a farm-to-school program. "Just parents are not enough. The school must embrace it as well to make it sustainable." Last but not least, she advises, "Dream big. Take baby steps toward your goals and the task of starting a program will flow easily."<sup>11</sup>

The Resources page on the website offers evaluation tools, case studies, funding opportunities, and information about local, state, and national policies that support the farm-to-school program. The website also includes information on existing farm-to-school programs, with contact information—you can get help and advice from those who have already initiated a program. The staff at the National Farm to School Program is available to answer questions and provide technical assistance. The site also lists upcoming conferences,

workshops, and other events.

Imagine healthy school lunches that children and teachers actually look forward to eating. Imagine your children planting seeds, nurturing plants, and eating the literal fruits of their

labors. Imagine your children choosing

fresh, nutritious food over chemical-laden, overly sugared and salted processed foods. A farm-to-school program at your school could make this a reality—and it can start with you.

For the rest of this article, see [www.mothering.com/articles/pressing-issues/feeding-children/feeding-children-choices.html](http://www.mothering.com/articles/pressing-issues/feeding-children/feeding-children-choices.html)

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Center for Ecoliteracy [www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org)
- Community Food Security Coalition [www.foodsecuritynow.org](http://www.foodsecuritynow.org)
- The Edible Schoolyard [www.edible-schoolyard.org](http://www.edible-schoolyard.org)
- National Farm to School Program [www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org)
- The School Lunch Initiative [www.school-lunchinitiative.org](http://www.school-lunchinitiative.org)
- Slow Food USA [www.slowfoodusa.org](http://www.slowfoodusa.org)
- Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED) [www.vtfeed.org](http://www.vtfeed.org)

Cathy Olson is a mom, a freelance writer, and the author of *Simply Natural Baby Food* and *The Vegetarian Mother's Cookbook*. For more information, visit [www.simplynaturalbooks.com](http://www.simplynaturalbooks.com).



# farmers' market feast

Buy local and teach your kids about caring for their health, community, and the earth. BY ALISA SMITH

EVERYTHING KIDS DO is a learning experience. That's why, before we do something even as seemingly mundane as buying groceries, it's important to think about just what kids are learning. This hit home during the year I researched and wrote the book *Plenty: One Man, One Woman, and a Raucous Year of Eating Locally* (published this spring by Harmony), when I set myself the lifestyle challenge of eating only foods grown or processed within 100 miles of where I lived, and went every week to the farmers' markets.<sup>1</sup>

I'd enjoyed farmers' markets for many years, but only as a dabbler—I'd go once or twice during the growing season and figured I'd "done" it. But going there all the time, sunshine or rain, meeting the farmers, and observing other participants (which seems a more appropriate word than *shoppers*), I realized what a fundamentally different experience it was from the supermarket.

"At the supermarket, they've got Hot Wheels in the vinegar aisle. You don't have to deal with that crass marketing at the farmers' market," says Leanne Mogerman of Vancouver, British Columbia, whose son, Isaac, is five.<sup>2</sup> When Isaac was younger, every Hot Wheels encounter was a struggle, and she had to explain to him why he couldn't have the flimsy, Chinese-made toys. "I actually talked to the supermarket about it," she recalls. "They said, 'They pay us thousands of dollars a year to do it,' " referring to the now-common practice of product placement. "I said, 'So do I!' The fact that I spent thousands of dollars a year there didn't seem to matter."

Leanne prefers the farmers' market to the supermarket because she is happy to know that Isaac is absorbing important life values there: understanding where his food comes from, connecting with growers, watching the seasons, and supporting grassroots economies. Best of all, in an age when our produce travels an average of at least 1,500 miles from farm to plate, eating local foods can knock two zeros off that figure. It's an easy way to dramatically reduce the use of fossil fuels as we face the end of oil.

"I think he likes it more. It's outside," says Leanne, reflecting her own more positive experience with him there. But Isaac pipes up with his own opinion, and it seems he lives more in the moment. His favorite part of the farmers' market they frequent is the "bouncy castle," he says, but "the grocery store is more fun, because I get to ride in the carts."<sup>3</sup>

Leanne is surprised at his answer, which is more evidence of the intentional allure of the commercial experience. Supermarkets are designed so that corporations can move their products into consumers' hands, and children are particularly vulnerable to the messages and wares peddled to them. They are entranced by the cartoon characters that appear in advertisements, and which they

then recognize on packages. Supermarkets in the US introduce 17,000 new products each year, and you can bet none of them is a new variety of broccoli (unless, perhaps, it's genetically modified). Instead, we get Oreo-cookie granola bars, cotton-candy-flavored Go-Gurt, and Disney-branded cereals.

Luckily, farmers' markets can be designed to suit the needs and interests of children, parents, and the rest of the community. "I'm interested in places that can reconnect children with their childhood. Children today are much more controlled and structured—their experience of a place is always under the hand of a parent," says Mark Francis, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of California at Davis, who has studied children's involvement in urban planning.<sup>4</sup> Francis designed the Davis Farmers Market, which opened in the early 1990s to much acclaim.

The Davis Farmers Market is a classic California grassroots rescue of public space from private greed. In the 1980s, a new shopping mall was on the drawing boards, to be built next to Davis's beloved Central Park. Residents rose in opposition, put forward a referendum, and succeeded not only in scrapping the mall, but doubling the size of Central Park, and including Francis's vision of a farmers' market. "Some people call it mixed use, but I call it mixed life," he says.

At the market's center is a playground where parents can watch children while they shop, without worrying about traffic or "stranger danger." There is a pedal-powered carousel, and nearby is an interactive play fountain and real animals for petting. "I took my own children there all the time when they were growing up. It was my and my wife's favorite place to be," Francis recalls. The evening farmers' market and "picnic in the park" have become treasured institutions for Davis families.

While Ithaca, New York, modeled its market on Francis's utopian vision, most farmers' markets are still jerry-rigged onto parking lots; nonetheless, Francis says, they have a lot to offer. "There is a diversity of activity, conversations—everything is so much richer. Children can see where their food really comes from, that it's not always wrapped in plastic." Brian Halweil, in his *Ear Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket*, notes that ten times more conversations happen at farmers' markets than in grocery stores.<sup>5</sup>

The latest improvement planned for the Davis Farmers Market is a community garden, which points to the other big area where parents can get children in touch with their food and away from commercialism. When I was a girl, my favorite snack was sweet carrots pulled from the earth—I didn't ask permission, and felt a