Fresh, healthy, Local and Sustainable Fruit Year-Round

We all know that fruit is good for us. The steady stream of research and articles on the subject reminds us constantly of the amazing antioxidant benefits of blueberries and how an apple a day keeps the doctor away. When we go to the supermarket, we know we are supposed to do the healthy thing and load up on fresh fruits, right? But are those fruits really fresh and really good for us? How far did those strawberries have to travel and what did they spray on them to keep them looking "fresh" in the middle of winter? Were they grown in a way that positively or negatively impacted the waterways and wildlife in that area, not to mention the farmers who grew them?

You can always make the choice to "vote with your wallet" as I like to say, and buy certified organic from the store, but this can be expensive for many of us, and the reality is still that if it's not in season where we live, it had to travel a long ways to get to our produce section.

The good news is, there are many ways you can add more fruit to your diet, and still keep it healthy, local and good for the environment. There are plenty of small farms out there growing tree fruits and berries, and this is the perfect opportunity to get to know them. Buying, picking and growing fruit in quantity when it is in season is very economical, and although fresh fruit may not be available all throughout the year, there are some simple ways to store and preserve it at home so that you always know exactly where it came from.

Visit Your Local Farmer's Market

If your town or urban neighborhood has a farmer's market, this is the place to find your local fruit. Farmer's Markets give

you an opportunity to have a conversation with farmers directly about how they grow their crops, whether they are organic, and which varieties they recommend. Farmers tend to highlight freshness with the produce they bring to market, so you will know it was picked the day before or even early that morning. Some farmer's markets also continue through the holiday season, allowing you to continue buying local fruit that farmers have stored in their own cold storage.

The other added benefit of a trip to your local farmer's market is the community building aspect of getting to know your farmer and your fellow like-minded locavores. Throw in some live music and healthy food carts, and you can't go wrong for a fun weekend activity. When a fruit is in season, expect to find whole flats available at discount prices that you can preserve for the year ahead. Some farmers also offer "seconds" or not-so-perfect boxes of fruit at a deep discount, that is perfectly good for canning or freezing.

U-Pick

I can't recommend this option highly enough, especially if you have kids. While the low prices and feeling of self-sufficiency are reason enough to get your fruit in this manner, what it comes down to is that it is really just plain fun.

What's not to love about making an outing to visit a farm, spending some time outside picking fruit, snacking as you go and maybe having a picnic lunch while you're out there? You will get to know firsthand exactly where your fruit came from as you create good memories and start traditions to pass down in your family.

Farmers charge less per pound for fruit they don't have to spend time picking, plus they will usually offer a discounted price based on your quantity, so stocking up for the year at a U-Pick farm really does pay off.

Grow Your Own!

You don’t need a lot of land to grow a lot of food. Depending on the size of your yard, you can plant fruit trees, berry bushes, and strawberry beds to create a productive, edible landscape. Raspberry patches can produce an incredible amount of fruit, strawberry beds planted with ever-bearing varieties can be harvested multiple times throughout the growing season, and a single dwarf fruit tree that is properly pruned can produce a massive amount of fruit. From the five blueberry bushes growing in our yard, we were able to freeze 30 quarts and have fresh berries to eat all summer.

Even if you live in a small space, raspberries and blueberries can grow in pots, dwarf fruit trees have been developed for patio growing, and strawberries can be planted in vertical containers with holes on the sides or in old gutters along your fence or balcony. You may not have room to grow enough quantity for preserving, but you can grow your fresh day-to-day eating fruit for the summer and stock up at the farmer’s market for long-term storage. Aside from the cost of plants, soil amendments and your water bill, this is a very low-cost option for securing your yearly fruit supply.

Go Gleaning

If you take a walk around your neighborhood in the fall, you may notice fruit trees on abandoned lots and in public spaces dropping fruit all over the ground. Urban foraging, or gleaning, is a great way to get your local, organic fruit and keep it from going to waste. Fallen fruit in parks and public areas creates a lot of mess and clean-up labor when it falls on sidewalks and lawns, so you are doing landscape workers a big favor.

You may also have a neighbor who is too busy or physically unable to harvest the fruit in their yard. It never hurts to

ask if you can harvest from their trees, and offer them a portion of the fruit in exchange. It’s a good way to get to know the people in your neighborhood and build community. Some places even have gleaning groups that go around and help each other harvest fruit to share amongst themselves and donate some to local food banks. It is truly the “waste not, want not” principle in action, and it’s absolutely free.

Go Wild!

Few things can rival the flavor of wild berries, freshly picked from the vine. Blackberries, huckleberries, black cap raspberries, and a whole abundance of delicious fruits grow all around us in forests, fields, and the wild spaces. In some places, blackberries are so invasive that you don’t have to go far to find a patch to pick from. This, like U-picking, is a great activity for those with kids. Many families still carry on traditions of going on outings up into the high mountains to pick huckleberries in the late summer, to freeze and use in family recipes from jams to pies.

One of the best resources for where to find the best picking spots are your own grandparents or the elderly people you know. They have likely spent many a day out picking wild berries in their youth, and would enjoy sharing their experience and pointing you in the right direction. The other great thing about this method of gathering fruit is that it doesn’t cost a thing.

Preserve the Bounty

Here is the important key to keeping your fruit supply local. Many of us live in places where fruit doesn’t grow all year. Rather than going to the grocery store for a pint of strawberries from Mexico in January, why not thaw a pint of local strawberries from your freezer? Instead of buying a bag of dried fruit with added sweetener and preservatives, you can

snack on a handful of delicious dried plums from your backyard.

If you spend the time stocking up over the summer, all the fruit you need is right there until it comes back into season the following year. Freezing, canning, dehydrating, and cold storing are all fairly simple methods of keeping your fruit supply local through the winter months. Things like apples, pears, and kiwis will often keep for several months in root cellars, garages, or any place that stays cool without freezing. Berries can be frozen in baggies or containers. Peaches, plums, and pears can be canned in a simple honey syrup, and jams can be made out of just about any kind of fruit you like.

For folks that are just plain busy, your freezer is your friend. Once you have gone about gathering and storing your fruit for the year, you will gain the satisfaction of doing things for yourself, some peace of mind, and closer connections with your food and your farmer. *The Ball Blue Book of Preserving*, and *The Big Book of Preserving the Harvest* by Carol Costenbader are a couple of excellent resources with instructions and recipes for canning and other preservation methods. Also, most state universities offer Master Food Preserver programs through their extension offices, similar to the Master Gardener program.

A Mountain Hearth Recipe for Strawberry Jam and Life

Ingredients

A local Farm
Friends and People You Love
4 cups fresh picked strawberries
3/4 to 2 cups sugar
1/4 cup fresh squeezed lemon juice

3/4 cup water
3 tsp Pomona’s Pectin
4+ tsp Pomona’s calcium water (comes with pectin)

Take a trip out to your favorite local farm with your friends and the people that you love. Make a day of it, pack a picnic lunch, and enjoy the experience. Pick as large a quantity of strawberries as you can manage processing, and “vote with your wallet” to support your local farmer. Then it’s time to get your supplies, get home, and get to work, because fresh strawberries don’t keep long.

Mash the strawberries and stir in lemon juice and sugar. I always go with the middle ground and use about a cup. The cool thing about Pomona’s Pectin is that you can use whatever type or amount of sweetener you want. I like having options. Then boil your water and pulse in a food processor while adding pectin powder. Blend for about 2 minutes. Stir this into your fruit mash. Then add the calcium water until the jam starts to jell. Ladle into clean jars leaving about an inch head space and freeze. I keep mine up to two years in the freezer and it’s a wonderful year-round treat!

Recommended Reading:

- *80% Raw Food Diet*

Sources:

- *A Recipe for Strawberry Jam and Life* – A Mountain Hearth
- National Farmers’ Market Directory
- U-Pick Farm Directory
- *Create an Edible Landscape* – Mother Earth News
- One Green World (Edible Plants Nursery)
- USDA Cooperative Extension Service Locator Map
- Ball Canning
- Pomona’s Pectin