

Buying Local Food: Investing in Community

By Eliza Buck, Agricultural Resources Committee Coordinator

Do you know who is growing your food and how? Media alerts us more and more frequently to possible health hazards in our foods. How many of us have wondered whether to eat spinach and peanuts recently?

The increase in numbers and success of farmers markets directly reflects our concern about where our food comes from and how it is grown. According to the US Department of Agriculture, the number of farmers markets has risen significantly in the last decade from 2,746 farmers markets in 1998 to 4,685 in 2008.

San Juan County is fortunate to have three thriving farmers markets. Lopez, Orcas and San Juan Islands all have Saturday markets, and this year San Juan Island has a mid-week farmers market on Wednesday afternoons. Our farmers markets benefit all of us: farmers reap greater returns for their products, consumers have access to fresh, healthy foods, and the community money spent at the markets circulates longer throughout the county.

Numerous studies on the impact of "buying local" confirm that a dollar spent in community-based businesses circulate through the local economy more times than when spent in businesses that are owned by non-islanders. This phenomenon is dubbed the "local multiplier effect."

When you shop at the local farmers' market, you not only support the farmers, you are also supporting our local economy by giving your dollar another chance to circulate through the islands. You buy the tastiest tomatoes from Jim who, in turn, buys eggs from Richard who buys spinach from Eliza who buys beef from Guard who buys gas from Charlie who buys books from Laura who buys strawberries from Katie who buys kiwi from Bruce You get the picture. When we buy from one another our dollars stay in our community and many more of us benefit.

In a 2002 study on the local food economy of Central Puget Sound, researcher Viki Sonntag concluded that, "spending food dollars locally significantly increases regional income because local food economy businesses are likely to use local suppliers." Additionally, "locally directed spending supports a web of relationships, rooted in place, which serves to restore the land and regenerate community." (See report at <http://sustainableseattle.org/Programs/LFE%20Files/LFE%20REPORT%20FINAL.pdf>)

In the islands, we are witnessing the flowering of relationships – linkages – through our farmers markets. People come to the markets to socialize as well as shop. This network of people, in turn, shares information, educates

one another and creates new opportunities. In the past five years, there has been an increase in the number of agriculture-related activities, including farm-to-school programs, community dinners featuring local foods, seed saver groups, grain trials, farm tours, farmer-chef connection events, community gardens, and committees and task forces exploring ways to strengthen our island food system. This increased community interest, when expressed as more local purchasing, fosters new enterprises, stimulates our local economy and strengthens our self-reliance. Though some people believe that buying locally means spending more, when we do, we are investing in our own wellbeing.

Buy local! Look for the Islands Certified Local decal in food establishments and on products.

