

Best Practices for Shoppers at the Farmers' Market¹

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This factsheet is one in a "Florida Farmers' Markets" series that is designed to provide information to managers, vendors, and shoppers of Florida farmers' markets on topics highly relevant to starting and running a food business: regulations, best practices, and marketing. This series serves as a useful guide to help improve safety and marketability of Florida farmers' markets.

What is a farmers' market?

According to the Farmers Market Coalition (FMC), a farmers' market is a public and recurring assembly of farmers or their representatives who sell their own agricultural products directly to consumers (FMC 2021). Farmers' markets have a fixed location and open to the public with regular operating schedule. The most common agricultural products sold at a market include fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, and grains. Farmers markets have advantages over retail markets. First, they facilitate personal connections between farmers, shoppers, and communities. Second, by directly selling products to consumers without middlemen, farmers can earn more dollars and shoppers can purchase fresh local food from their area, which can improve the local economy.

What can I expect to find at a farmers' market?

Food products sold at local farmers' markets reflect the region's seasonal agricultural production. Farmers' markets vary in size and in the number and type of products sold at

the market. In general, you can find a wide array of locally produced products, including fresh vegetables, fruits, baked goods, honey, eggs, cheese and other dairy products, jams and jellies, seafood, and meat products. Markets also offer non-food items such as plants and other nursery stock, crafts, candles, and soaps. Some farmers' markets hire musicians or other entertainment professionals that add to the ambiance of the market.

How can I locate a farmers' market near me?

Farmers' markets are located in various places, including downtown areas, community parks, farms, and parking lots. Farmers' markets can be found through several resources, including the USDA Farmers Market Directory and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) Community Farmers Market Locator. Additionally, local Extension offices will provide information on farmers' markets in their respective counties.

Farmers Market Tips for Shoppers

Before going to the market:

- Get directions, and make sure you check the hours and days of market operation.
- If the market is close to your home, think about walking or riding your bike. If you do decide to drive, consider carpooling. Some markets have limited parking spots.

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- Bring your own reusable bags with handles. Insulated bags are recommended if you plan to purchase cold or frozen foods.
- Remember your sunglasses and sunscreen because you will be shopping outdoors.
- Dress comfortably and wear walking shoes.
- Bring cash, and plan to pay with small bills and change. Some vendors do not take credit cards or checks as payment.
- Create a shopping list to help with your meal planning and to minimize food waste.
- If your family qualifies, bring your EBT card/SNAP. Many farmers' markets in Florida participate in the Fresh Access Bucks (FAB) program and provide a one-to-one match for Florida-grown produce.

At the market:

- Arrive early. Arriving early allows you to get the best selection.
- Leave plenty of time to browse through the different stands. Look at what is being offered before you make purchases.
- Talk to the vendors about what fruits and vegetables are currently in season and don't be afraid to try something new. Vendors and farmers are happy to share their knowledge and some will offer food preparation tips or recipes.
- Ask vendors about their products, if it is artisan, local, organic or home-made. Keep in mind that vendors can claim "organic" only when their product(s) have been certified by the USDA or accredited certifying agents (ACAs) (Baier and Ahramjian, 2012; USDA AMS, 2018, 2020)
- Carefully inspect fresh produce for bruising or heat stress.
- For processed food items, check the ingredient label for any allergens.
- Bring small children. The market is a great place for children to learn where their food comes from and let them select a new fruit or vegetable to try at home.

Leaving the market:

- When you are ready to leave the farmers' market, plan to immediately head home or find refrigerated storage for your purchases. Food should not be left out more than 1 to 2 hours depending on the heat of the day. If you need to make a stop before heading home, bring a cooler filled with ice for food items prone to spoilage.

- Keep fresh produce out of the direct sunlight.
- Separate fruits and vegetables. Some fruits release ethylene gas as they ripen, which will sometimes affect the ripening of vegetables stored nearby.
- Wash and cut produce just before consumption. Remember to use a designated cutting board for fresh fruits and vegetables to avoid cross-contamination of harmful pathogens from raw meat and poultry.
- Store prepared food items in the refrigerator and preferably in food-grade storage bags or containers.
- Some fresh fruits that are either shelf-stable or that produce ethylene gas during their ripening process can be stored on the kitchen counter, such as tomatoes, avocado, bananas, citrus, onions, squash, and herbs.
- Remember, properly stored food items retain their flavor, color, and nutrient value for longer periods of time.
- If you do purchase fresh foods in larger quantities, consider common food preservation methods for long-term storage. Consider home canning, dehydrating, or freezing your foods for a later date. Check your local Extension office for canning and dehydrating courses.

Food Safety Recommendations for Shoppers

At the market and on the way home:

- Keep produce and other food products that need to be refrigerated (e.g. meat, eggs) cool at the market by bringing insulated bags or coolers filled with ice or icepacks. Do not allow perishable foods to be left in the temperature danger zone (40°F to 140°F) (USDA FSIS 2020a) for more than 2 hours, as pathogens can grow rapidly in this temperature zone.
- Buy perishable items just before you plan to leave the market, and make the market your last stop before going home.
- Keep raw meat or seafood separate from other foods, especially ready-to-eat food items, to prevent cross-contamination by potentially harmful bacteria.

At home:

- After shopping, clean your reusable grocery bags. Cloth bags should be washed with detergent and thoroughly dried. Plastic-lined insulated bags should be washed with water and soap and air-dried.
- Clean:
 - Always wash hands before and after handling food.

- Wash produce under running water before eating. You do not need to use soap or produce cleaners. You should wash produce with skins and rinds that are not eaten, because harmful bacteria and other residues can be transferred from outside to the inside during cutting.
- Separate:
 - Separate raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs from other foods in the refrigerator to prevent cross-contamination.
 - Prepare raw meat, poultry, and seafood using separate cutting boards, plates, and utensils from those that will prepare fresh produce or any other ready-to-eat food.
- Cook:
 - Use a food thermometer to ensure the safety of meat, poultry, seafood, and egg products for all cooking methods, since color and/or texture are not reliable safety indicators. These foods must be cooked to a safe minimum internal temperature to destroy any harmful bacteria (USDA FSIS 2020b).
 - Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm.
 - When cooking in a microwave oven, cover food, stir, and rotate for even cooking.
- Chill:
 - Use an appliance thermometer to ensure the temperature inside the refrigerator is consistently 40°F or below. The freezer temperature should be 0°F or below.
 - Refrigerate or freeze meat, poultry, eggs, seafood, and other perishables within 2 hours of purchasing. On hot summer days when the outside temperature is above 90°F, refrigerate them within 1 hour.

Resources

Florida Certified Organic Growers & Consumers, Inc. “Fresh Access Bucks – Increasing Food Access and Florida Farmer Sales at Market Statewide” (<http://www.foginfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/FreshAccessBucksDescription-2017-1.pdf>)

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS). “Community farmers markets” (<https://www.fdacs.gov/Consumer-Resources/Buy-Fresh-From-Florida/Community-Farmers-Markets>)

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS). “Crops in season” (<https://www.fdacs.gov/Consumer-Resources/Buy-Fresh-From-Florida/Crops-in-Season>)

US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). “Raw Produce – Selecting and Serving it Safely” (<https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/UCM174142.pdf>)

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Farmers Market Coalition (FMC). 2021. “About farmers markets” (<https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/education/qanda/>)