

Talking Local: Florida Consumers' Food Buying Decisions when Given Local Food Information¹

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The fourth of a six-part series about Florida consumers and their perceptions of local food, this EDIS publication focuses on Florida consumers' purchasing preferences for local food when presented information about where commodities are grown in Florida and the seasonality of Florida-grown products. The Talking Local Series focuses on ways Extension agents can assist Florida farmers and ranchers in the labeling, sale, and promotion of locally produced products. The Talking Local publication series also provides Extension faculty who work with or are interested in local food programming with information about Florida consumers' perceptions of local food.

Introduction to Local Food

Consumer demand for and interest in locally grown foods has significantly increased in recent years (Low et al., 2015). As individuals and organizations continue to make decisions about how and why they purchase or eat particular foods, a need has developed to further expand localized consumer markets (Gorham et al., 2015). Local food plays a large role in Florida agriculture; in 2011–2012 the local food industry contributed \$8.3 billion to the state's economy (Hodges & Stevens, 2013).

In response to growing consumer interest in local foods and its impact on Florida agriculture, the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education conducted a study to explore consumers' perceptions of local food. For a more comprehensive understanding of consumers' perceptions, a series of 10 focus groups was conducted, with two taking place in each of Florida's Extension Administrative Districts. A total of 93 participants were involved in the study, which included participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, occupations, and ages. Focus groups are not generalizable beyond those who participate in the study.

Food Preference Scenarios

Consumers were asked to discuss their preferences for locally produced foods when provided information about growing location and seasonality. Consumers were presented with 20 flash cards (Figure 1) and asked to make decisions about their purchasing preferences. Each flash card featured a Florida-grown fruit or vegetable with information about the commodity's primary growing location within the state and months of availability. The fruits and vegetables featured on the flash cards were: avocado, blueberry, cabbage, cantaloupe, carambola, carrot, celery, cucumber, grapefruit, mango, greens, orange, pepper, snap beans, squash, strawberry, sweet corn, tangerine, tomato, and watermelon.

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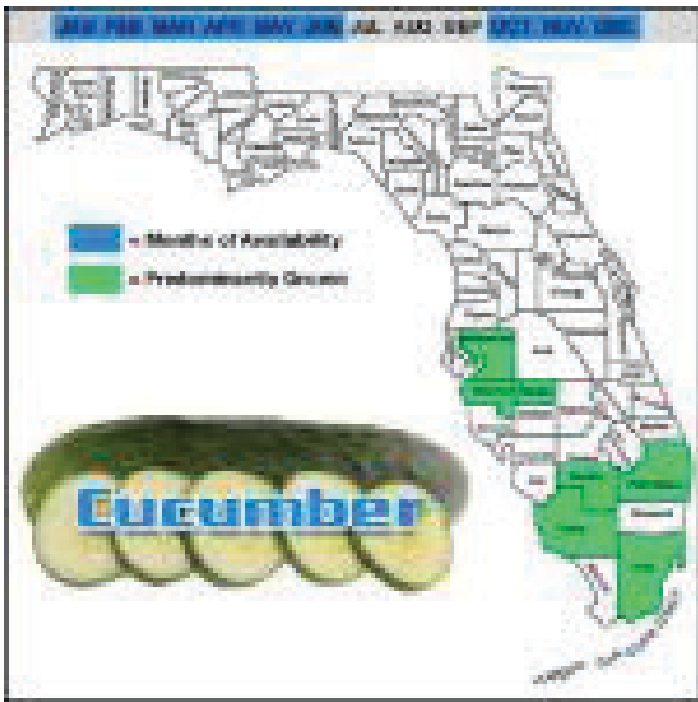


Figure 1.
Credits: undefined

Consumers were instructed to pretend they were leaving the focus group and going to a grocery store where they would select five of the fruits or vegetables to take home. Consumers were asked to repeat the same steps, but pretend that they were shopping in the middle of October. Note that these focus groups took place in April and May, impacting the current availability of the fruits and vegetables and therefore the decisions of consumers.

Selection of Five Fruits or Vegetables in April/May

Consumers participating in the focus groups were asked to discuss what five fruits or vegetables they would purchase that night at the grocery store. Consumers discussed personal preference, versatility, and health benefits as having a direct impact on their purchasing decisions. Secondary concerns discussed as having an impact on their decisions were the growing location and availability of the fruits or vegetables.

PERSONAL PREFERENCE

Consumers discussed selecting foods that they and their families liked. Consumers discussed having personal preferences for certain foods and dislike of other foods. A northeast Florida consumer said, “I would say I’m a really picky eater so going through this I was like ‘don’t like that, don’t like that, don’t like that,’ so I definitely chose items that I liked. And then I was happy to see if they were grown

in Alachua and yay, it was the time you can buy them. But definitely, what I preferred was a first consideration.”

Consumers also discussed factors that influence their preference, such as having eaten the food as a child. A central Florida consumer said, “I picked what I eat. Traditionally greens and what I grew up with, green salad, these are the kinds of things that we eat. I didn’t look at all at when they were grown or where they were grown. I’m just cooking.”

VERSATILITY

Consumers discussed picking certain fruits or vegetables because the foods were versatile and could be used to prepare many dishes or meals. Use in multiple recipes affected one central Florida consumer, who said, “I picked tomatoes, because I can do a lot with them. I can use them in a lot of recipes.” When discussing the primary reason for motivating their purchasing decisions, a south-central Florida consumer said, “The variation with which I can use everything I chose.”

HEALTH BENEFITS

The health benefit offered by each food was another factor consumers took into account when making their purchasing decisions. Consumers discussed picking certain fruits and vegetables that were rich in vitamins and nutrients. One northeast Florida consumer said, “The first thing I was looking at was whether they fit our nutritional requirements for nutritional standards, and the second thing I was looking at was whether they were available now, and the third was whether the kids would go along with it.” A central Florida consumer said they selected their five fruits and vegetables because “They were the healthiest of the bunch.”

GROWING LOCATION OR AVAILABILITY

Consumers discussed the growing location and months of availability of the fruits and vegetables as having an impact on their purchasing decisions. Several of these consumers did, however, discuss that the growing location and months of availability were secondary to their personal preferences. One northwest Florida consumer said, “I choose mine for months of availability, and which ones I liked. I didn’t really factor in where they were grown.” One northwest Florida consumer discussed not paying attention to growing information until after they had made their decisions, saying, “I picked all of mine and then looked at everything else, when they were available, how they were grown.”

Selection of Five Fruits or Vegetables in October

After discussing their fruit and vegetable choices in the month of April, consumers were asked to use the same index cards and make food purchasing decisions as if it were the month of October. Consumers discussed their selection of fruits and vegetables changing based on holiday and weather-dependent cooking and the availability and seasonality of some commodities, or that there would be no change in the type of commodities they would purchase.

HOLIDAY AND WEATHER-DEPENDENT COOKING

Consumers discussed that they changed their selections for the month of October because they cook different, and sometimes heartier foods, during the fall season, including more soups, vegetables, and casseroles. One south-central Florida consumer said, “I exchanged all of mine because in the fall of the year I like to do a lot of soups and stews. I would buy things like cabbage, carrots, celery, corn that would go into the soup or stew.” A central Florida consumer discussed changing cooking styles due to winter being close and said, “I pretty much picked all vegetables, corn, carrots, tomato, pepper, greens because I was thinking about making soups and stuff like that because it’s getting closer to winter.”

AVAILABILITY AND SEASONALITY

Consumers discussed changing their purchasing decisions because something they had previously picked was not available or of high quality in October, and switching it out for products that were in season and of high quality during that time of year. One south-central Florida consumer discussed switching out a product due to lower quality in the winter and said, “I swapped out strawberries because even though it says that it is grown in October in Florida, they are not very good. They are not good in October.” One central Florida consumer discussed purchasing preferences varying throughout the year and said, “I notice I tend to not buy this much tropical fruit in the fall or winter, because the taste is just not as... they’re not as succulent, not as sweet, so I tend not to buy as much tropical fruit.”

NO CHANGE

Consumers also discussed the month having no impact on their purchasing decisions, due to personal preferences for certain foods as well as availability of products year-round at grocery stores. Consumers discussed personal preferences playing a role in not changing their choices, and one central Florida consumer said, “I pretty much picked all the

same things, except the greens, ‘cause I like the stuff I like to eat, it don’t matter when.” Consumers also discussed the availability of products year-round, even if it means accepting products that have been preserved. One northwest Florida consumer referred to being able to get products frozen if fresh was not available and said, “Mine was the same, because like I said, if it’s not fresh, Publix has it in the little bags you throw into the microwave.”

Impacts of Months of Availability on Decision Making

After discussing which five fruit or vegetables they would purchase, consumers were asked specifically if they took the months of availability into consideration when making their choices in both April and October. Consumers discussed that the months of availability did not impact their decisions, that they looked at the months of availability and took them into consideration, or that the foods would still be available in the grocery store even if the card indicated that the foods were not available.

NO IMPACT ON DECISION

Consumers discussed that the months of availability did not have impact on their decisions to purchase certain foods. When asked if they took months of availability into consideration when making their purchasing decisions, consumers responded by saying, “No,” or, “Not at all.” When discussing the months of availability not having an impact on their decisions, one northeast Florida consumer said, “I noticed them, but it did not affect my choice.”

LOOKED AT MONTHS OF AVAILABILITY

Consumers discussed looking at the months of availability before making their food purchasing decisions. Some consumers discussed that they did look at the months of availability when making their purchasing decisions, but that although they looked at it, the months of availability did not impact their decisions. When referring to availability, one south Florida consumer said, “I mean, I definitely looked to see that they are available now.” Consumers also discussed only noticing the months of availability because they were on the cards and one south-central Florida consumer said, “I did look at the months only because it was on the cards, so I figured it might be important.”

FOODS STILL AVAILABLE

Consumers discussed that the months of availability did not impact their food purchasing decisions because the foods could always be purchased at the grocery store. One south Florida consumer said, “I didn’t even look at the time they

are available because they always have them all year long.” A northeast Florida consumer discussed the ability to find all types of foods throughout the year and said, “In this day and age of availability, honestly you can get any kind of fruit or vegetable at any point of the year, depending on how much you want to pay for it.”

Impacts of Growing Locations on Decision Making

Consumers were asked how the growing locations of the foods impacted their food purchasing decisions. Consumers discussed that the growing locations were interesting and that they noticed them, but some of the consumers discussed that the growing location did not impact their decisions. The discussion of growing location was impacted by where consumers were from. Consumers discussed the growing location having no impact on their decisions, finding the growing location interesting, looking at growing locations, or making location-dependent observations and decisions.

Found Growing Location Interesting

Consumers discussed finding the information about growing locations to be interesting and informative, and many discussed learning something about where a certain fruit or vegetable was grown. One northwest Florida consumer said, “It is very surprising to see where some of the stuff is grown. Like I already said, I had no idea.” Another south Florida consumer said, “This is very informational, though, I like to see which counties.”

Although consumers found this information interesting, it still did not affect the purchasing decisions of some. One central Florida consumer said, “I don’t know, it was kind of interesting to see what was where, but it didn’t determine whether or not I buy it.” One south Florida consumer said, “I looked at it because we have been talking about it all day. Otherwise I probably wouldn’t have looked as hard.”

Noticed Growing Location

Consumers discussed that they did look at the growing locations. However, these consumers discussed that although they looked at it, the growing locations did not impact their decisions. Consumers discussed only looking at the growing location because they were in a focus group discussing local food, something they otherwise wouldn’t notice.

Consumers discussed not taking growing location into consideration when making their decisions. When asked whether or not they looked at the growing location and took into consideration when making their food purchasing decisions, one northwest Florida consumer said, “I did, but it didn’t factor into my decision.”

Opportunities

Increase awareness of Florida-grown food. The consumers indicated that they found information on the cards to be very interesting. By incorporating similar information into programming, Extension might attract consumer interest in local agricultural production, while also increasing knowledge and awareness. Each county should consider promoting commonly grown crops when in season to their consumer clientele. Promotion could be done in food-related programming, newsletters, websites, social media, exhibits and displays, television, radio, banners, and/or newspaper columns.

Match programming with availability. Cooking or canning demonstrations, as well gardening and even nutrition programming can be catered to focus on crops currently available. By highlighting crops currently available, clientele could develop an increased awareness and knowledge of product seasonality. In addition, offering farm tours when primary crops are in season might be beneficial to increasing consumer awareness and personal experience with local food.

Discuss use and versatility. Much of consumers’ cooking habits were based on their personal preferences and versatility. To appeal to these preferences, Extension should consider incorporating recipes, product use, and product versatility information into food-related programming, such as cooking demonstrations, gardening, canning, and nutrition programs. Discussing the versatility of products can encourage future consumption and willingness to purchase more locally grown products that consumers may not have previously know how to prepare to use in multiple ways. In addition, Extension agents could partner with local farms to offer “local food nights,” which would allow area residents to come and sample local food from their area.



Figure 2.
Credits: undefined

Summary

Although consumers appreciate information about growing seasons and locations of their fruits and vegetables, they do not consider this information to be the most important factor when making food purchasing decisions. Consumers discussed many reasons for purchasing certain foods, including personal preferences, versatility, health benefits, and seasonal cooking. Consumers did not take factors such as growing location or availability into consideration when making decisions about purchasing food. Incorporating more information about the benefits of local and in-season commodities into programming may help raise awareness of these factors for influencing product selection.

Consumers discussed the importance of versatility, specifically the ability of a food to be used in multiple recipes, when making food purchasing decisions. Extension agents could include recipe cards or provide preparation suggestions to consumers when discussing locally grown crops with clientele.

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