

Buy Local on a Budget

Ways to stretch your food dollars at farm stands and farmers markets, including how to use SNAP and market coupons.

FREE GUIDE

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Before you start

Buying local has a reputation for costing more. Sometimes it does. But a farm stand or market can also be the best value in town, if you know how to shop it. Fresh food in season, bought straight from the grower, can cost less than the same food in a store, and it's fresher. And there are programs that help people stretch their food dollars at farmers markets.

This guide is a short list of practical ways to do that. It's for anyone who wants to eat locally without spending more than they have to.

Check the details. Programs, prices, and which markets take what change from year to year, and I haven't put dollar amounts here because of that. Where a program matters, I tell you who to ask.

In this guide

- **Part 1:** Shop smart: seasonal, bulk, and seconds
- **Part 2:** Use benefits at markets: SNAP, FMNP coupons, and incentive programs
- **Part 3:** Make it last, and a short checklist

Part 1: Shop smart

The same dollar goes further when you shop the way farmers sell.

Buy what's in season

The best prices at a farm stand are usually on whatever's ripe right now, because that's when there's the most of it. Out-of-season items cost more because they're scarce. Ask the farmer what's coming in strong this week, and build your meals around it.

Ask about "seconds" and bulk

Many farms sell produce that's bruised, misshapen, or a little overripe for less, and they often sell by the box, flat, or bushel at a lower price per pound. These work well for sauce, soup, jam, and freezing. They won't always be on display, so ask. Not every farm does this, and that's okay.

Compare by the pound

Prices come in all kinds of units: per item, per pint, per bunch, per pound. If you're comparing two stands, or a stand and a store, work out the price per pound. That tells you which is the better deal.

Go in with a list, and a little cash

A short list keeps you from buying more than you'll use. Bring small bills and your own bags. Many vendors take cards now, but small bills are still the easiest way to pay at a farm stand, and they make change simple.

Talk to the farmer

Farmers know what's at its best, what stores well, and how to cook what they sell. A short chat often turns up a better buy than you'd have found on your own.

Part 2: Use benefits at markets

Many farmers markets and farm stands work with food benefit programs.

If you get SNAP, or if you're eligible for WIC or Senior FMNP coupons, you can use them to buy local food at many markets and farm stands. The key is to **ask the market**. Not every market or vendor takes every program. Here's what I know, from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and from Cornell's nutrition program.

SNAP at farmers markets

Many farmers markets accept SNAP EBT cards. Look for a "SNAP Accepted" sign. Some markets use a central terminal at an information table, where you swipe your card and get tokens to spend with the vendors. Others have vendors who take EBT at their own stands. If you're not sure how it works, go to the market's information table or find the market manager.

Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP)

New York runs two Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs: **WIC FMNP** and **Senior FMNP**. People who qualify get coupons they can spend on fresh, locally grown fruits, vegetables, and culinary herbs at participating markets and farm stands. Look for signs that read "FMNP Accepted." Prepared foods, baked goods, and imported produce don't qualify. Not every market takes the coupons. The programs are run by the state with Cornell Cooperative Extension, so your county office can tell you how to get them.

FreshConnect checks

The state also has a program called **FreshConnect checks**, which aims to increase what SNAP shoppers can buy at farmers markets, farm stands, and mobile markets. It's offered at markets that run a central SNAP terminal, and it's not available everywhere, so ask the market whether it's offered this season.

Matching and incentive programs

Some markets add their own bonuses for people using SNAP, such as extra tokens or matching dollars, and these differ from one market to the next. They can stretch a benefit a long way, so ask at the information table.

Questions to ask at the market

- ☐ Do you take SNAP? Where do I go?
- ☐ Do you accept FMNP coupons? Which vendors?
- ☐ Is there a bonus or matching program right now?
- ☐ What can I buy with each one?
- ☐ Are there any rules, such as no change given on tokens?

Many market listings on the Almanac are tagged SNAP or FMNP, which is a good place to start, but programs change, so check with the market before you go. For questions about the state programs, you can call the Department of Agriculture and Markets Nutrition Unit at (518) 457-7076, extension 1.

Part 3: Make it last

A few ways to get more meals out of what you buy.

Freeze, dry, or cook ahead

If you buy more than you can eat fresh, freeze it. Many vegetables, berries, sauces, and soups freeze well. If you try canning, use tested recipes only. Cornell Cooperative Extension in your county can point you to safe ones.

Share a share

A CSA or meat share can cost less per pound than buying piece by piece, but it's a big payment up front. Splitting one with a friend or neighbor cuts the cost, and some farms offer smaller shares or payment plans. Ask. My guide *How to Buy a Share* has the questions to ask.

Grow a little yourself

Herbs and greens are easy to start in pots, and your county's Cornell Cooperative Extension office has gardening help.

Quick checklist before you go

- ☐ I made a short list and looked at what's in season.
- ☐ I brought small bills, bags, and my EBT card or coupons, if I use them.
- ☐ I know which markets near me take SNAP or FMNP.
- ☐ I'll ask about seconds, bulk prices, and bonuses.
- ☐ I have a plan for what I'll freeze or cook ahead.

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