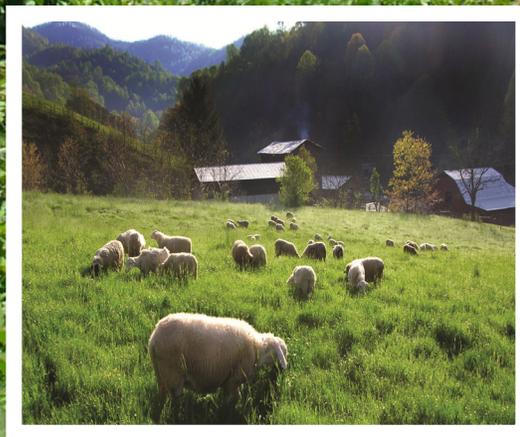


# Growing a Local Food Economy

## A Guide to Getting Started

*produced by Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP)*



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## **Family farms and local food are the heart of healthy communities.**

What if every child in your community understood where their food comes from and how to make healthy local food choices? What if everyone in your community had access to fresh, healthy, locally produced food? What if local economies were more stable and stronger thanks to a greater connection to and reliance on quality products from local farms? What if your food was safer because you knew where it came from, how it was grown, and who grew it? With a thriving local food economy, these what ifs are a reality.

For more than a decade, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) has helped create a vibrant local food economy in the Southern Appalachians and served as a national leader in the local food movement. ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. We achieve our mission by partnering with individuals, other organizations, and farmers. Together, we form a growing movement that is committed to preserving our agricultural heritage; increasing access to fresh, healthy food; and saving family farms.

This guide is intended to provide your community with valuable guidance on the core components of developing a strong local food economy.



This project received support from the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund.



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## How Can You Build Your Local Food Economy?

Based on our experience helping to successfully build local food economies in Western North Carolina and throughout the Southeast, we've determined that there are four key pillars to success:

<b>Generate Awareness and Demand</b>	Create a Local Food Campaign, the foundation for building awareness and demand. The campaign is the means by which you encourage consumers to become knowledgeable about the foods they eat, increase demand for family farm products, and provide opportunities for buying local. In other words, it's the means to create a climate in which farms and businesses have the support they need to innovate and thrive.
<b>Develop Regional Capacity to Support Local Farms</b>	Strengthen regional capacity through trainings, conferences and workshops, manuals and toolboxes; and research for farmers, teachers, decision makers, and consumers. Build partnerships among diverse community members and interests.
<b>Expand the Availability of Locally Grown Food</b>	Bring people together: farmers and markets, chefs and kids, consumers and local food, tourists and farms, institutions and organizations. By doing so, the amount of local food that is purchased, eaten, and served is increased.
<b>Support Systemic Change</b>	Research your region and learn from experience. Identify and advocate for public and private policies that support local food systems.



### Getting Started in Your Community

There are many ways to expand local food activities. You can create a local food and farm guide, establish programs that bring local food and farms into schools and restaurants, organize local farmers markets, and lots more. As you consider ways you want to increase the demand, accessibility, and consumption of local food in your region, it's important to answer several questions: How do you define "local"? In what geographic area will you focus your efforts to expand the availability of local food? What types of food do you want to make more available to the community? Who are the producers of those products in your region, and what types of farming operations do they have? How much of the food that is eaten locally can be grown locally?

#### Define "Local"

While the word "local" implies geographic proximity, there is, understandably, little consensus on the meaning of local and regional food systems. For some, local refers to an area within a county or a radius of 50 or 100 miles from the place where the food is consumed. Still others define their areas using a foodshed framework, a term borrowed from the concept of a watershed and used to describe the flow of food from areas where it is grown to places where it is consumed. Using this framework, a local food system may be very small or encompass several states depending on how much food is produced in a particular area.

Boundaries for local food systems are relative. The reality is that each "local" area blends and overlaps with others. The primary determinants of a definition of local are how the people of the region define local for themselves, the major market areas for

**Consider the following questions when thinking about how you might define "local" for your campaign:**

- *What is the geographic area that constitutes "local," and how are you defining it?*
- *Are there farming production methods included in your definition of "local"? If so, what are they and why are they included?*
- *Are there types of businesses included in your definition of "local"? Are there types of businesses you will or won't work with?*
- *Are there other characteristics your organization uses to define "local" food and farms?*

local farms, and the capacity of the organization or entity to work within a defined local food system. The boundaries of local are also fluid. As conditions change or as new information sheds light on the realities of the local food system, the local food area may need to be redefined. The important thing to remember is that there is not an absolute right definition for local; it all depends on what works and makes sense for your community.

### ***Understand Your Community's Local Food Potential***

In order to effectively determine the best ways to go about building or strengthening a local food economy in any given community or region, it's vital to understand the bigger picture of farm and consumer trends, demographics, and markets. Within this larger context, you can identify the greatest barriers and opportunities for building a thriving local food economy and the right progression of steps to take to build it at a scale that will work for your community.

A *local food assessment* is a powerful tool to achieve this. An assessment can increase your understanding of the current local food system, help you define local as it relates to your efforts, engage key community organizations and stakeholders across a broad spectrum, and help you identify potential markets. It enables you to choose the most appropriate and viable strategies to expand the availability of local food in your area.



Things to consider about your region for a local food assessment:

- What are the primary economic drivers in your local economy?
- What are the demographics of your community: total population, poverty rate, education levels, median income, etc.?
- What is the composition of rural vs. urban areas?
- What is the current dollar value of agricultural products sold/produced?
- What are the primary agricultural products sold/produced?
- What are the major trends in agricultural production?
- What support for farmers and local markets currently exists, such as CSAs, produce auctions, independent food distributors, Farm to School activities, organized farmer groups, etc.?
- What is the farm data: size, number, land in farms, average size, crops produced, trends, etc.?
- What is the current demand for local food?
- What are the primary barriers to developing markets for local food?
- What, if any, processing facilities are in or accessible to your area?
- How is food being distributed?

Your next step may be a local food campaign.

## Local Food Campaign Initiatives

A local food campaign encourages people to buy local food or foods. Such campaigns can include some or all of the following:

- Developing a promotion and communications plan
- Developing direct markets for local food
- Creating a certified brand for local food
- Creating a local food guide
- Promoting farm tours and farm tourism
- Establishing programs such as farm to chef, Farm to School, and farm to institution

### **Developing Direct Markets for Local Food**

Direct markets—farmers markets, farm stands, u-pick farms, and community Supported Agriculture (CSA)—can provide a higher return to farmers when compared to other markets. They provide an easy starting point for farmers new to marketing because of the minimal cost required for entry. They also provide a direct connection between consumer and farmer, which cultivates customer loyalty and advocacy for local farms and food. Profiles of area farmers can further help rebuild the connection between consumers and the people who grow their food; and a seasonal produce chart, regional calendar of events, and area map can help maintain that connection throughout the year.

### **Creating a Certified Brand for Local Food**

Combined with an effective marketing campaign, a regional brand can create a strong link between a product, its origin, and other unique qualities. It can be an effective way for producers in a region to differentiate their products, develop customer loyalty, and, in the long term, provide them with competitive advantages. A brand also ensures the term “local” retains its value in an increasingly crowded messaging market.

Creating a regional brand is an intensive project that requires working with a graphic designer and/or marketing firm to develop a logo, slogan, and other brand messages, as well as working with a consultant/facilitator to articulate a detailed marketing plan for launching the brand. A branding project also requires a multi-year commitment and plan for future support. As you create your area’s own certified brand for local food, you’ll want to:

1. Define “local” for your brand,
2. Define how farmers or businesses qualify,
3. Develop a system to ensure compliance,
4. Evaluate and solicit input from participants, and
5. Develop a marketing plan to increase participation and awareness.

At ASAP, the tag line that anchors our campaign is **Local Food—Thousands of miles fresher!** Today, you’ll see our phrase on bumper stickers and cars across the region. Over time, marketing efforts increase the demand for local food.



Appalachian Grown is ASAP’s certified brand for local food. The Appalachian Grown logo is displayed with farm products grown or raised in Western North Carolina and the Southern Appalachians. When consumers see the logo, they know they’re buying fresher foods that support family farms, strengthen the local economy, preserve rural culture, and protect the natural beauty of the Appalachian mountains.

Sales of Appalachian Grown certified products have grown from \$10 million in 2007 to over \$30 million in 2010; total local food sales branded since inception: \$73 million. In 2011, 753 farms, farmers markets, restaurants, grocers, bakers, processors, and caterers participated in the program.

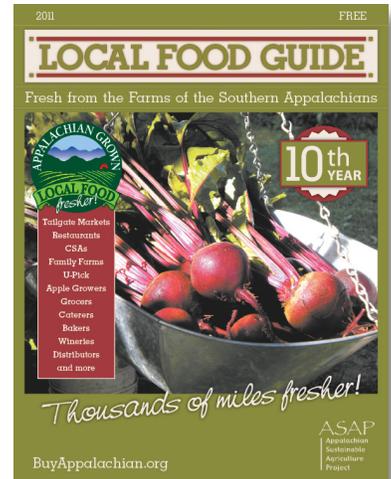
## Local Food Guide

A local food guide educates consumers and visitors about local food, farmers, and the foods and traditions of the region. It can include listings and information about farms, farmers markets, CSAs, u-pick farms, grocers, bakers, restaurants, caterers, and farms to visit. Local businesses can sponsor and advertise in the guide, gaining visibility.

It can take anywhere from just a few weeks to many months to create your first guide, which then should then be updated annually.

## Farm Tours and Farm Tourism

When given the opportunity, people are excited to visit area farms and learn the personal stories of the farm families that provide their food. Farm tourism is a rapidly growing economic opportunity for many areas that adds to the visitor experience—for out-of-towners and locals alike. Opportunities for your organization or group to highlight farms include tours, farm stays, food festivals, and other local food experiences.



**ASAP will distribute the millionth copy of our *Local Food Guide* for Western NC this year.**



### Between 2002 and 2011, ASAP's *Local Food Guide* has grown significantly:

CSAs listings have increased from 12 to 97

Farm listings have increased from 36 to over 500

Farmers market listings have increased from 28 to 84

Participating grocers have increased from 7 to 22

Participating restaurants have increased from 15 to 72

## Farm to Community

Linking farms directly with businesses and institutions in your community can be an important part of building a stronger, more sustainable local food economy. Here are a few linkages to consider:

### ***Farm to Chef***

Engaging chefs and restaurants in a local food campaign provides visibility for locally grown food, allows chefs to participate in community education efforts (especially through cooking demonstrations in schools), and helps brand the participating restaurants, which can drive sales. You can provide participating restaurants with marketing materials that tout their use of locally grown food and, in turn, your work. A farm-to-chef directory can be a useful tool for developing successful relationships between farms and restaurants. Product lists, contact information, and a cross-referencing index make it easier for growers and buyers to form partnerships that are mutually beneficial. You can also include advice for growers, locations of farmers markets, and highlight seasonal availability of local food to help make the farm to chef path as smooth as possible .

#### **Get Local Campaign**

ASAP's Get Local campaign promotes farms by featuring a different local product each month of the year. Marketing materials such as recipe cards, posters, check stuffers, and placemats are distributed to chefs/ restaurants, schools, and other organizations to promote the year-round opportunities to purchase and utilize local food products.

### ***Farm to School***

The U.S. government's new focus on fresher, healthier foods in schools presents an unprecedented opportunity for local producers and students. In March of 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill authorizing federal grants to help schools cover the initial costs of bringing locally grown foods into school meals. Because of the initiative, Farm to School programs grew from 400 nationally in 2004 to over 2,095 in 2009. The implementation of Farm to School programs is a way to introduce new market opportunities for local producers while providing health, nutrition, and education opportunities for students and teachers.

Communities can support Farm to School programs in a number of ways. Counties can introduce legislation to actively support farms that supply Farm to School programs by rewarding sustainable agriculture practices. Resolutions can also support the development of leadership groups like food policy councils or food and agriculture coalitions to assist Farm to School programs in procuring equipment and curriculum. Another important asset lies with county health departments. Getting involved in local food and educating the community on the health benefits of eating fresh produce allows the county to widen the network of support for Farm to School programs by reemphasizing lessons to the community at large.

The goal of the Farm to School initiative is to provide positive experiences with healthy foods. To achieve that goal, Farm to School stresses four components: farm field trips, nutrition education, school gardens, and local food in cafeterias. The implementation of Farm to School programs is a way to introduce new market opportunities for local producers while providing health, nutrition, and education opportunities for students and teachers. If linking farms to schools is a goal in your community, you may want to connect with the National Farm to School Network. With active participants in at least 40 states, the network can help you learn more.



### **Farm to School in Action**

ASAP's Growing Minds program strives to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships—between farms and schools—that create dynamic, wellness-focused learning environments for children. Working with farmers, educators, and communities to serve local food in schools, the program expands opportunities for farm field trips, experiential nutrition education, and school gardens.

ASAP's Growing Minds work includes:

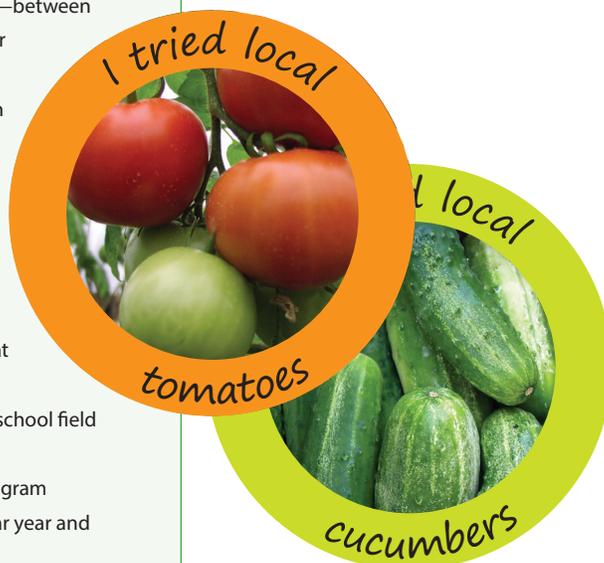
**Local Food in Schools**—We link local food producers with cafeterias to increase opportunities for local food sales to schools and provide healthier choices for students.

**Curriculum Connection**—We provide teacher training and integrated curriculum that brings the school garden into the classroom.

**Hayride**—We create a guide for teachers that lists local farms able to accommodate school field trips.

**Get Local @ School**—A spin off from ASAP's successful "Get Local" campaign, this program emphasizes different local products available in the cafeteria throughout the calendar year and provides tips and training on preparation of local foods for school cafeteria staff.

**Farm to School Cooking Conference**—In 2011, we held our first cooking conference to connect local chefs with teachers for cooking demonstrations and training for classroom learning application.



### **Farm to Hospital**

Hospitals have the potential to not only treat the sick, but to serve as community role models for proactive healthy choices. Featuring fresh local foods in their cafeteria and offering food and farm related educational programming improves public health and sustains farms. Farm to hospital programs offer a range of services to hospital food service, administration, staff, patients, and the broader community. These programs include services such as the distribution of local food guides and support for sourcing local foods, as well as educational programs such as cooking classes, wellness programs, field trips, marketing, and promotions.



#### **Steps for a Farm to Hospital program in your community:**

1. Partner with regional hospitals to increase purchases of local food
2. Work with local farmers to provide information, tools, and assistance to access hospital markets
3. Work with hospitals to adapt their food procurement and distribution systems to accommodate local purchasing
4. Implement other Farm to Hospital local food initiatives such as CSAs, farm field trips for hospital food service personnel, and improved access to farmers markets
5. Promote the program throughout your community

## Online Tools to Boost Your Local Food Economy

As you develop and once you've created your local food campaign, you'll want to spread the word, of course. The online arena is a great place for your message. Here are a few tools to consider:

**Website:** A website provides an easy way for the public and media to contact your organization and find up-to-date information about your work. It's also a great place to announce your events and recent accomplishments, share photos, and lots more. If you don't have the time or resources to set up a site, a blog may be for you.

**Blog:** Much like a website, a blog is a great way for the public and the media to learn about you and find information about your work. If updated regularly, it's also a great way for them to find short articles about local food products, contests, and events that they can reprint or also include on their blogs.

**Social media:** Sites like Facebook and Twitter provide a great opportunity to reach consumers who use them to show their affiliation with businesses and organizations. Because it's quick and easy to update these sites on a daily basis, they can be used for last-minute announcements, like contests and events, and to garner excitement about your campaigns and initiatives. What's more, local media outlets are on these sites, too, and increasingly using them to get the "scoop" for stories.

**E-newsletters:** E-newsletters can be a great outlet to communicate your message and a place to put organizational news that often doesn't belong on blogs or social media sites. You can develop weekly or monthly newsletters that share what local foods are in season, farmers market news and happenings, local food and farm events, contests, and more. Because you'll send e-newsletters only to people who've expressed interest in receiving them, it's also a great opportunity to ask for support—whether in the form of volunteers or donations.

## Increasing the Capacity of Local Farms and Farmers

Growing for local markets is in many ways different from growing for commodity markets.

Farmer education and training in this context has several components. One involves the need for skills or assistance regarding marketing farm products locally. A second involves the need for technical support and information regarding growing new crops or using sustainable growing practices, which are generally more important in local markets. A third area deals with information. Farmers need information about how to communicate with large-scale buyers, about packaging requirements, quality standards and delivery parameters. They need information specific to each type of local market (i.e., restaurant, retail, institutional).



In this context, business and market planning, farm branding and promotion, customer engagement, salesmanship strategies, etc; are skills critical for producers to effectively diversify their farm businesses and market their farm products in local markets. Farmers need to know industry standards for different types of local market outlets; packaging, labeling, food safety certification, distribution, quality standards, traceback standards, etc. Additionally, farmers need help developing business relationships with local buyers and vice versa. Within the context of a developing local food system, farmers and buyers must be appropriately matched; the suitability of this connection is crucial to ensure the sustainability of the relationships. Finally, to compete effectively, local food must be clearly identified in the marketplace. Demand for local can only be realized if consumers can find and identify local products .



## Healthy Local Food for Everyone

In a just and sustainable food system, fresh, healthy local food should be available to everyone. One way to make that possible in communities where access is a challenge is to encourage farmers markets to accept Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) payments and access other food supplement programs. Below are some guidelines.

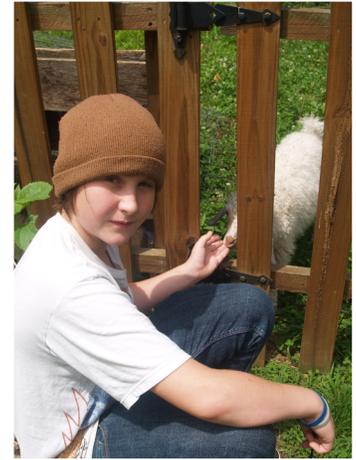
### Working with EBT at Farmers Markets

1. Understand the demographic make up of the group in your region.
2. Learn about SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)/EBT.
3. Connect with the Food and Nutrition Services Director at the Department of Social Services.
4. Work with other social service organizations such as:
  - Food banks—post information about the farmers market in food distribution sites; put a flyer in food boxes; and provide information about the market in their newsletter.
  - Housing authority—do a mailing to residents in public housing; organize a local food cooking demo or a taste testing with the community service coordinator of individual public housing complexes.
  - YMCA, Head Start centers, and other organizations that provide subsidized childcare services—send home a flyer with children; take the children on a farmers market field trip and provide them with a coupon to purchase food items; conduct a local food cooking demo with parents.
  - Health centers and free clinics—some offer nutrition education classes for low income community members. Attend a class and encourage participants to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables at the farmers market.
5. Advertise market promotions and your ability to accept EBT in local media outlets.
6. Create promotional materials such as a flyer, poster, and/or rack card that uses images and language that are appropriate for the EBT recipients in your community.
7. Provide additional incentives to encourage people to come to the market, such as weekly kids' activities—a market scavenger hunt, small craft projects, or cooking demonstrations—and matching coupons.
8. Invite organizations to the market that provide needed services.



**To get started on developing a local food system, keep the following in mind:**

- Gain a basic understanding of your current local food system.
- Partner with the organizations in your community that have a vested interest in a thriving local food economy.
- Have a clear plan so that everyone knows where you're headed and what you want to achieve.
- Start from wherever you are—it doesn't take a lot of money to get the right conversations going and gather basic data.
- Think broadly and creatively about potential funding from not only agricultural sources but educational, economic and community development, tourism and other entities.



**Remember: Evaluate Your Project**

Research and data collection are important as a basis for understanding the impacts of building a local food economy. Information gathered through local food assessments and through formative and summative program evaluations should be used to choose the best program or project and to assess and report results. Logic models and other planning tools can be used to help create an effective, timely plan of action.

ASAP is a regional leader and a national resource for comprehensive local food programs. For more information about our programs or the consultation services we provide to organizations and communities interested in creating or expanding local food markets, please visit us online at [www.asapconnections.org](http://www.asapconnections.org) or email us at [info@asapconnections.org](mailto:info@asapconnections.org). You can find us on Facebook and Twitter @asapconnections.



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