



CONSUME MORE PLANT-BASED + LOCAL FOODS

Your Community, Your Food

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Have you ever been frustrated with nutrition information? To some, it feels like recommendations and steps toward a nutritious diet are always changing as scientists learn more about food and health. A nutrition truth that has held up over time is that food from plants tends to be linked to better health outcomes.

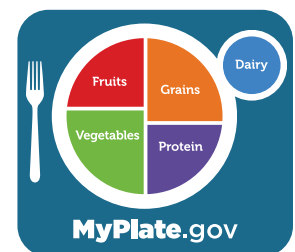
Choosing foods that come from the Earth or are produced close to where you live are important pieces of the sustainable eating puzzle. Food choices



affect not only our health but the planet, too. A diet consisting of more plant-centered foods, like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, delivers both health and environmental benefits. Similarly, buying foods grown and produced in your community, when possible, like meat, dairy, and eggs, reduces the energy investment needed to bring fresh food to your table. Research shows these choices tend to have a smaller environmental impact than others.

What does a plant-based diet look like?

Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds all come from plants and you usually eat them in a form that is similar to how they grow. If you use the USDA's MyPlate as a guide for building meals and snacks, then you are consuming a plant-based diet. MyPlate shows more than 75% of the plate coming from plants. A plant-based diet is not a vegan or vegetarian diet. Instead, a plant-based diet encourages eating a variety of foods from the fruit, vegetable, grain, and protein groups. Some people like to call it a plant-centered or plant-focused diet. This allows room for quality



Whether plant or animal foods, the closer they are grown, raised, or produced to where you live, the better.



animal products, like dairy, meat, poultry, fish, and seafood. Every additional serving of plant foods matters!

Location matters

Think about how far berries and melons must travel during the winter months in Kentucky to get to your plate. Typically, these items are only found in Kentucky in the warm summer months. It is possible to eat only plant-based foods, but those foods could come from thousands of miles away and have a negative impact on the environment because of the amount of energy and resources needed to grow, process, transport, distribute, and store them as they travel across the globe. We should thank our global food system for providing us with a variety of nutrient-dense foods year-round. However, whenever possible, choosing and consuming local foods is one of the best ways to strengthen local food systems

and the economy within our own community. An established local food system can withstand crises, natural disasters, and other food system disruptions. Whether plant or animal foods, the closer they are grown, raised, or produced to where you live, the better.

Pull out this sentence in a call-out box: Whether plant or animal foods, the closer they are grown, raised, or produced to where you live, the better.

Why is eating plants important?

Incorporating more whole, plant-based foods into your diet is a nutritious choice. Plant-based foods contain fiber, phytochemicals, a variety of vitamins, and minerals. Fiber and phytonutrients are two important parts of a nutritious diet that can only come from plants and have been shown to keep the body healthy over time. Some plant foods can be a source of quality protein, too.

Fiber

Fiber found in plant foods can help generate a feeling of fullness. For example, salad greens contain fiber and you must chew them a lot before you can swallow and digest them. More chewing tells the body that it is feeling satisfied. In addition, fiber digests slowly, takes up a lot of room in your stomach, and takes a long time to pass through the gut which helps the body feel full for longer. Diets with lots of fiber may also reduce the risk of heart disease, lower cholesterol in the blood, and improve gut health and digestion. On average, experts recommend that adults consume approximately 25 grams of fiber each day. The Nutrition Facts label on

a food item tells you how many grams of fiber the item has. Look for food options that have 3 or more grams of fiber per servings.

Phytonutrients

Phytonutrients are linked with several health benefits including chronic disease prevention and better health outcomes over time. Phytonutrients often give the foods they are found in their bright color. This is why “eating the rainbow” is encouraged because this represents a diet high in phytonutrients. Table 1 provides a breakdown of different colored



Table 1. Phytonutrients and their potential health benefits

Color	Names of Phytonutrients	Potential Benefits
Red	Anthocyanidins, flavanones, carotenoids, and flavanols	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote healthy aging and memory function• Helps keep the heart strong and may reduce the risk of heart disease
Yellow or Orange	Carotenoids, flavanones, and flavanols	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve vision at all times of the day• May help to lower bad cholesterol
Blue or Purple	Anthocyanidins, flavan-3-ols, and polyphenols	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helps control blood sugar levels• May also promote healthy aging and memory function
Dark Green	Carotenoids, flavanones, and flavanols	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improves immune function and decreases inflammation• Reduces the risk of high blood pressure
White	Allicin, quercetin, anthoxanthins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lowers cholesterol• Protects cells from damage• Improves immunity

Protein

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans encourage varying protein sources to include more plant-based sources of protein like beans, legumes, nuts, and whole grains in the diet. Not only do these sources provide protein but can also provide fiber. Together, protein and fiber help people feel full after a meal or snack. Plant-based protein sources, like beans, often make for a budget-friendly meal and can stretch a recipe to feed more people. Table 2 provides examples of plant-based protein and the amount of nutrients found in each food.



Table 2. Examples of plant-based protein foods and their protein and fiber content

Food Type	Grams of protein per (serving)	Grams of fiber per (serving)
Black Beans (cooked)	15.2 (1 cup)	15.4 (1 cup)
Chickpeas (Garbanzo Beans) (cooked)	14.5 (1 cup)	12.5 (1 cup)
Lentils (cooked)	17.9 (1 cup)	15.6 (1 cup)
Peas (cooked)	4.3 (½ cup)	4.4 (½ cup)
Peanuts	9.15 (¼ cup)	3.2 (¼ cup)
Almonds	7.5 (¼ cup)	4.5 (¼ cup)
Pumpkin Seeds (with shell)	3 (¼ cup)	3 (¼ cup)
Brown Rice* (cooked)	4.52 (1 cup)	3.51 (1 cup)
Unenriched Instant Oats (cooked)	3 (½ cup)	2 (½ cup)

*In comparison, unenriched white rice has less protein than brown rice per 1 cup serving and very little to no fiber.

Meat alternatives

Meat alternatives or substitutes are gaining popularity, and you can find them in many grocery stores. These products make up less than 1% of the meat industry. People who buy these items typically buy them along with beef and other meat products. While meat alternatives are a plant-based food option, many are highly processed and require substantial amounts of resources and energy in the food system. Meat alternatives have positive and negative qualities. Below is a short list of pros and cons that may help you decide if a meat alternative product is a healthy and sustainable choice for you and your family.

Table 3. Pros and cons list for meat alternative products compared to regular meat products

Pro	Con
Require less water or land space to produce	Some products can be expensive and more difficult to find on grocery shelves
Higher in fiber and may be equal to animal products in protein per serving	Highly processed and requires substantial resources and energy to produce
May be lower in saturated fats and contain little cholesterol	Some products appear to be higher in sodium

Eat with the seasons

When possible, buying fruits and vegetables that are in season in Kentucky, whether buying it at a farmers’ market, grocery store, or road-side stand, supports a healthy environment as well as the local economy.

Buying seasonally can be confusing. Consider whether the food you are buying can be grown near where you live. *Local seasonality* is often perceived to help people connect with their food and to help them gain a better understanding of the true seasons of food. Seasonal food typically grows near the place it is sold to consumers and does not typically require large amounts of energy for storage or transportation. On the other hand, advancements in technology, speed of transportation, and changes in agricultural practices allow us in Kentucky to experience *global seasonality* of foods. However, the distance some foods travel to us requires substantial energy investments and use of natural resources to keep it in perfect condition. There are several ways listed below that help you eat with the seasons.

- **Visiting a farmers’ market** that is nearby at any time of the year is a good way to see what is “in season.” Farmers will pile their fresh-picked harvests onto tables for customers to buy and take home.



- **Stopping by roadside stands** can often help people score a great deal on fresh, local produce during the growing seasons.
- **Growing your own food** in your backyard, on a windowsill, or in a community garden is a perfect way to eat in season. When the vegetables or fruits are ripe, you can harvest them and eat them right away. When the garden provides excess, food preservation with canning, freezing, and drying, can allow you to eat seasonal food year-round with little environmental impact.
- **Checking out the grocery store produce aisle** may result in seasonal items. Produce is typically on sale during its growing season because it is easier to source. When you see fruits or vegetables you know grow in Kentucky, look to see where the food came from and think about if it is typically grown at that point during the year. Ask the grocer if they support local farmers with their products.
- **Produce prescription programs** can improve access to nutritious foods like fruits and vegetables. Talk with your health professional to determine if you are eligible for this service.
- **Volunteering at a community garden** is a way to make connections with your community and help grow food for yourself and others. This is also a great option for individuals who may feel overwhelmed by the idea of having their own garden.
- **Getting involved with a CSA** is another way to eat in season. CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture. When people sign up to receive CSA shares, they sign up to receive boxes of food each week or month during the growing season and provide guaranteed financial support for local farmers and producers. CSA shares may include fruits, vegetables, meats, poultry, and/or eggs.

Choosing animal protein

For animal protein, consider buying locally raised beef, poultry, pork, or other animal-based products to support Kentucky producers. Kentucky is rich in agriculture and buying Kentucky products helps keep money in the Commonwealth, supports neighbors and farmers, and strengthens the local food system. It is important to keep in mind there are multiple aspects to sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. By spending dollars on food grown and raised by local producers, when possible, Kentuckians can help support a more self-sustaining food system for the future.

Support sustainable changes in your community

There are several ways community members can support sustainable eating for everyone living within their local area. When we make changes within the community and not just our homes, everyone living in that area benefits and we support our environment at the same time. Look at the list below and be inspired to take initiative in your community.

- **Volunteer or organize beautification efforts in your community.** These could include adopting trees, picking up litter, or maintaining local parks and gardens.
- **Contribute energy and resources into local community gardens.** This may include providing land, water, tools, or seeds or providing physical labor.
- **Serve on coalitions or boards that facilitate sustainability efforts.** Also, consider the ways you already contribute within your community and if there are ways to incorporate efforts to support sustainable eating.
- **Buy local when possible.** Encourage others you spend your time with also to look for local foods.

- **Sell your products locally** if you regularly have excess garden produce or a small farm.
- **Talk to local schools and other organizations that serve meals.** This would be ideal for those who have farms or large-scale garden operations that could provide local foods for regularly served meals.
- **Check with your local Extension office** about opportunities to support the local food system.

Food for thought

Plant-based foods have a lower environmental impact than others and are loaded with nutrients. In the end, buying these foods in season and locally puts dollars back into the local Kentucky economy and supports our communities.

1. If you are concerned that fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, or beans don't contain protein, think again! As mentioned in the chart above, 1 cup of black beans has approximately 15 grams of protein. When combined with brown rice and other ingredients, they not only make a delicious meal that **satisfies MyPlate recommendations** but are also **a complete protein with a low environmental impact**.
2. Think about the benefits of a colorful plate. Incorporating carrots, red peppers, or kale into your salad does more than make your meal an eye-pleasing rainbow. These colorful fruits and vegetables contain **phytonutrients** and **fiber** which can positively affect your health.
3. Sustainability reaches beyond the environment. It also covers society and the economy. So, when you have the chance, consider **buying food from a local producer or grower** because it puts money back into the local economy and builds a strong and resilient food system.

When planning a meal, consider including a plant-based protein as the protein source for at least one weekly meal. Or think about if anyone near you grows or raises food you could buy. Making small changes like these can benefit your health and the planet over time.

References

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