

# A Deconstruction of the Terms “Local” and “Organic”

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## Introduction

The labels of “local” and “organic” can be positive, but they also have their downfalls. Unfortunately, the terms “local” and “organic” have become major marketing tools for massive corporations who are not invested in sustainability, and instead seek the largest possible profit. Due to this, these terms have strayed from their intended purpose, which occurs with many words that can be exploited by companies for monetary gain, such as “natural” and “fresh.” The loopholes within terminology regarding the food system make it difficult to navigate, which is why it is more important than ever to be invested in and knowledgeable about your food. Hopefully, this article will provide direction when it comes to making sustainable food choices.

## Understanding the Term “Local”

Local is a term that is not directly defined anywhere. Each person, company, business, etc. defines local in whichever way applies to their circumstances. “Local” can apply to goods that are produced in the state in which the consumer resides, or produced within a 100 mile radius of the resident, or may be defined by several other classifications. The numerous definitions can make it difficult for many people to even understand the concept of local.

It is important to start by learning more about food production that surrounds the area or city where you live. Once you discover sustainable farms in your immediate area, you can purchase food from

them when available. However, not every product will be obtainable locally. An ideal blend of local and external food sources would include local regenerative small to mid-sized farms, a variety of community gardens, a bioregional scale and perspective, and external sources to fill in the gaps. External sources are necessary as some items will not be found where you live if they do not grow well in your climate, or if there are limited resources in your area. The goal is to do your best to support sustainably and locally grown food when you can while ensuring that non-local food in your diet is also from a sustainable source.

Another major issue with the term “local” is that many people automatically believe that it suggests the product they are purchasing is “inherently good,” or in other words, sustainably produced (Born and Purcell, 2006). Sustainable food systems are not necessarily local, and vice-versa. Both sustainable and unsustainable food systems exist throughout the world, and their distinction is determined by the practices being used by those in decision-making roles, such as farmers, corporations, government, etc. As Born and Purcell (2006) state, “Localizing food systems, therefore, does not lead inherently to greater sustainability or to any other goal. It leads wherever those it empowers want it to lead.”

All food systems, whether sustainable or not, are local to someone living in the region. For several people, the food that is local to them comes from

surrounding industrial and unsustainable farms. Though these farms are considered local, they are harmful to the earth and body. For additional insight on this topic, read “Avoiding the Local Trap” [by Born and Purcell](#), which can be found on the articles page of this website. This Born and Purcell article dives deeper into the term “local,” serving as another resource to develop an understanding of “local” in a way that is often left out of the conversation.

It is also important to understand that regeneratively produced food and/or local products are difficult for many people to access due to geographic and economic circumstances. The term local has now come to seem individualistic at times, portray superficial qualities of local concern, have little respect for local wisdom, and lose its significance of restoring public culture of democracy (DeLind, 2010). It can also be seen as elitist, or ostracizing of people who have greater difficulty accessing these products (DeLind, 2010). Local is about community, and it is important to connect the term back to its roots, which aim to bring together people of all backgrounds to create sustainable communities.

As mentioned earlier, local food for many will not be enough to sustain them or their families. The global food system will remain in place as the population has grown at an alarming rate, and everyone needs food to survive. Purchasing local food that has been produced sustainably is ideal when possible. However, for certain products, you will most likely still acquire them from a source not considered local. This is perfectly understandable. Simply try to buy local

goods that have been produced through use of regenerative practices when possible and do your best to find other products from sustainable sources when not available locally.

### **Understanding the term “Organic”**

Similar to the term “local,” the term “organic” is enveloped in complicated issues. Though organic food can at times provide a better option than non-organic food, major flaws still exist. Once the concept of “organic” food began to grow in popularity, large corporations hijacked the term and tweaked it into what it is today, overtaking the organic foods market. Much organic food is still not truly organic (grown without the use of chemicals and pesticides). There are even loopholes and gray areas that allow for a product to be labeled “USDA Certified Organic,” though the product is not truly organic.

Most large organic farms still employ some of the unsustainable farming practices utilized by conventional farms. In fact, a number of organic farms, especially those owned by larger corporations, may use insecticides and fungicides that are approved for organic production. Additionally, if a farm switches from conventional to organic, the soil most likely still has traces of chemicals in the soil, even though the food produced there can still be labeled organic (Greentumble, 2015). These are just a few of the main issues that taint the organic foods market.

Furthermore, many farms do not go through the trouble of becoming USDA certified organic, as it can be a long and

difficult process even when the farm has been previously compliant with the certification standards. It is important to become educated about the practices of your local farms in order to support those who are growing food organically and regeneratively whether or not a sticker displays their process.

Personally, I choose to eat organic because when a product is grown truly organically (no chemicals/ pesticides of any kind or other harmful practices to the land and body), it is better for my body and the earth. However, it is important to note that assumptions should not be made about food that bears a label such as organic, as it can be linked to the previously discussed concerns. The best approach to guarantee that you are purchasing truly organic food is by knowing where your food is produced as well as the practices used to produce it.

### **Supporting Sustainable Food Production**

One way to combat the issues surrounding the terms “local” and “organic” is to visit surrounding farms where you live. In order to discover local farms, you can do a quick online search, call your local government agency, or ask local grocers. Many local farmers sell food on location, host events, and allow customers to visit the farm to volunteer or take tours. Invest some time in exploring neighboring farms to learn how they grow their food and take the opportunity to build relationships with the land and farmers. This helps you to connect to your food and also allows you to fully understand how your food is produced as well as gain a deeper appreciation for the

resources used to produce it. Once you find farms that fit your criteria, you are on your way to supporting a better tomorrow and a sustainable food system.

Other methods that may be more accessible include shopping at the local farmers market or conducting your own online research. Farmers markets can provide a wealth of information regarding the local food system. They create a space where residents can learn about the production process of their food and find out more about farms in their area.

Most farms have their own websites as well. If you are unable to visit the farms or the farmers market in person, you can look up local farms online and get a general idea of the practices they use to produce their food. You may also be able to contact the farms for more information. Once you find a farm that offers sustainably produced products, you can look for them in local grocery stores, or occasionally at larger stores in your area.

Additionally, some farms offer online food purchasing options, which may be more accessible at times. Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) is another option provided by many farms that connects the producer and consumers to the harvest of a certain farm or group of farms. The customer usually receives a weekly or bi-weekly box of in-season produce or other farm goods.

Ultimately, to ensure truly local and organic food, the best option is to grow your own food sustainably, whether it be in your own garden, a friend’s garden, or a community garden. You may even propose

creating a garden at your place of work. This allows you to know exactly what is used to produce your food and to build a strong connection to the land and what you eat. These are just a few possibilities to help on your journey of supporting sustainably produced food.

## Conclusion

Eating local and organic food can still have its pitfalls. However, eating local food that is grown without the use of harsh chemicals and pesticides is necessary in order for the earth to thrive in health. It is vital to be involved with the food system. Exploring other [articles](#) and [books](#) on the Branching Together website can provide materials to build on your knowledge of the food system and to help you understand the good and the bad from both sides of the narrative. It is up to each of us to make these important decisions about food intake, who we support, and our choices as they all directly relate to the environment. Changes must be made to make true progress that will help the earth and one another.

## References

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