

# Eat where you live

**U**nder a hot summer sun, not far from the rush of traffic along Highway 400, a small group of farmers kneel in the soil and pluck bright red radishes from a lush field.

A short walk away, Jane Carnwath wheels a shopping cart around a small farmers' market where the produce is as fresh and local as it gets, travelling mere metres from the field before it's sold.

"[There's] pride in the locale," says Carnwath, who lives in downtown Toronto but frequents the market in the Holland Marsh area, about 60 kilometres north of the city. "I like the food. It's better. It sometimes costs a little bit more, but I think it's worth it."

Fuelled by concerns about the massive carbon footprint of shipping food thousands

of kilometres to Canadian supermarkets, more consumers are seeking out nearby producers like those at the Holland Marsh market. And often they don't even have to leave the city to find them.

In downtown Toronto, hidden beneath a towering maze of glass-covered office buildings, the crowd of people hovering around a small weekly farmers' market are

bearing this out.

For Bob Proracki, a sweet potato farmer from the northern shores of Lake Erie, the suit-wearing office workers browsing fresh produce over their lunch breaks represent a new, green-conscious cornerstone of his business.

"People are becoming more aware of the need to buy local and to stay away from shipments of food

brought from overseas," says Proracki while selling his fresh sweet potatoes and pre-cut fries at one of the 10 markets in the Toronto area he attends each week.

Picking through cartons of cherries and strawberries at a neighbouring table, Clare Baliva of Toronto says she visits local markets because she wants to know exactly where her food comes from.

"It's not just a preference in terms of the produce; it's a preference in terms of saving the environment, as well," says Baliva.

Part of the recent popularity of local food comes from the trendy book *100-Mile Diet*, written by a Vancouver couple who tried to live for a year only eating food produced within a radius of about 160 kilometres.

The 100-mile figure is

largely symbolic, says Toronto-area environmentalist Franz Hartmann, but it's a reminder that vast farmland still sits just beyond the sprawl of cities like Toronto, Vancouver or Halifax – and certainly closer than where most of the food we eat typically originates.

Environmental groups like the David Suzuki Foundation estimate the average Canadian meal travels about 2,400 km before it reaches the kitchen table.

"Every time you buy local instead of buying imported food, there's a lot less energy required in transporting it from far away to here," says Hartmann, executive director of the Toronto Environmental Alliance. He acknowledges there are many foods that just aren't produced in Canada, such as bananas and coffee, and that this country's long winters make it difficult to find local food year-round.

In other cases, geography proves a challenge – local sugar would be hard to come by away from the sugar beet farms of the Prairies, and much of land-locked Canada would have to rethink eating many kinds of fish.

"We're not saying buy everything local. That's just impractical," says Hart-

mann. "All that we're saying is, when available, if you've got a choice of an apple grown in Toronto's green-belt or an apple that comes from faraway, pick the apple that's grown in the green-belt... reduce your dependence on buying imported vegetables and fruits and food."

Back at the Holland Marsh market, overhanging signs distinguish between produce from nearby and afar.

Environmental groups across the country are encouraging people to pay attention to where their food comes from, and if the information isn't readily available, they should ask for it.

Many cities stage farmers markets rife with local food, and there are even groups, such as Toronto's Local Food Plus, certifying locally grown fruits, vegetables and meats with special labelling for consumers.

In B.C., the provincial government announced plans earlier this year to spend \$3 million on a campaign to make consumers aware of how far their food travels to convince them to buy locally.

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