

Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE)

Local Food Purchasing Guide

Local Foods

NC STATE

EXTENSION

INTRODUCTION

Farm to ECE brings the best of children's nutrition education, parent engagement, and menu options together to form a single, exciting program. Farm to ECE not only includes the fun activities in the garden or taste tests with parents and children, but also the food purchasing side with local farmers and distributors. In this guide, we present an overview of local food purchasing. Purchasing local food includes bringing food from local farms and gardens to child care centers to be used in meals, snacks, and taste tests. There are many different ways to buy local food, and this guide provides information that childcare centers and technical assistance providers can use to understand where to find local food, what to expect, and how to decide which local food source is right for different centers.

Farm to ECE can be viewed as a three-part system. Farms throughout a local area growing a diversity of fruits, vegetables, and proteins according to the seasons represent the food production side. To comprises the less visible but equally important relationships that bring local food to customers, sometimes by the farmers themselves and frequently by a chain of partners, including distributors, grocery stores, and farmers markets. ECE is the consumer, including not just the children who eat the food, but also their parents, guardians, teachers, childcare center directors, and even the larger community as it supports local agriculture.

Why We Focus on Farm to ECE in North Carolina: Benefits for Children and Farmers

Here in North Carolina, nearly 1 in 4 children live in households where food is insufficient at one or more points during the year (Food Research & Action Center, 2016). Children from these households are particularly at risk for a poor diet that may lead to

obesity and other diet-related diseases. ECE centers are important places for helping these children through nutrition education, positive role modeling of eating habits, and providing quality food for them to eat. Farm to ECE is an exciting way to bring new, healthy foods to children (and their families) while also supporting local farms.

Purchasing local food directly from a farm helps to support farmers. It can also help farmers build their consumer base as ECE centers let parents and staff know where the food is coming from so that they can look for that farmer in other markets. Local food can also come through a distributor, which still supports local farmers. Buying local food ideally improves the health of rural economies, helps farmers stay in business (which preserves farmland), and provides highly nutritious food for consumers.

Farm to ECE research is beginning to show positive results for children and their families. Meals in centers that focus on serving local food have been found to be more nutritious than non-local meal service, especially in fruits and vegetables (Gibson et al., 2014). Exposure to more fruits and vegetables by purchasing produce through the different seasons has also been demonstrated to influence children towards improved eating behaviors (Izumi et al, 2015; Williams et al., 2014). Creative ways to engage with farmers have been successful in other states, linking families to local food through on-site farmers markets and farm delivery services. Farm to ECE in North Carolina is part of a national effort to bring good food to children and support local farms, connecting people in need across our rural and urban communities.

STEP BY STEP TO LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING

Getting started with buying local food takes a few steps to determine what your center can do and then finding the best match for your needs. While there is no wrong way to buy local food for your center, there are many different right ways (see “Best Practices for Buying Local Food”). Don’t be discouraged if it takes time, switching options, or multiple partnerships to get the local food you want to your center. Remember to start small and follow the steps below to ensure the best results as you work through your center’s Farm to ECE purchasing options.

Stage 1. Self-assessment

- Review how ready your center is to purchase, prepare, and serve local food. Use the “Local Food Decision Tree” (Appendix 1) to determine what method is best for your center. Consider challenges such as these:
 - Pick-up versus delivery
 - New vendor and account versus same vendor and account
 - Preparation time for raw fresh fruits and vegetables
- Identify the right type of vendor for your local food needs. See the “Local Food Options” section to learn about the differences in local food options.
- Complete the “Menu Analysis Worksheet” (Appendix 2) to begin finding ways to incorporate North Carolina produce into your daily meals and snacks.

Stage 2. Finding Vendors

- As your center determines its preferred local food vendor type, begin exploring what options exist in your community. Check out some of the websites listed in “Local Food Resources” (Appendix 4) to find the appropriate vendor near you.
- Your local farmers market is a great place to meet potential vendors.
- Partnering with North Carolina Cooperative Extension can connect your center to many different agricultural resources across your county.

Stage 3. Preparing to Purchase

- If your center uses the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), be aware that you will need documentation from local food vendors to receive reimbursement. You can ask for receipts at farmers markets, produce stands, or directly from a farmer. Even if vendors don’t usually provide receipts, it’s not an uncommon thing to do. You may want to create your own receipt or invoice template that a farmer can fill out to make sure the document has all the information required by CACFP. Please note that if you are using micro-purchasing (under \$10,000), you are required to buy from several different sources. Refer also to CACFP rules for local food purchasing (see the link in “Local Food Resources,” Appendix 4).
- Decide how your center wants to define local food. There is no set definition for local food, so you’ll need to decide what’s most important to you, your staff, and the parents at your center. For example, do you want to support farmers in your county? Do you want to support farmers of a certain race or gender to match your values? Are you comfortable with a regional definition that crosses state borders? There’s no right answer. But whatever you decide, be sure to communicate that with your local food vendor and parents at your center.

Stage 4. Purchasing Locally

Now you are more than ready to start buying local food! Remember, it’s okay to start small, then step back and evaluate how things are going before you make any big steps. When introducing something new, always try a small change, then assess how it went and what you need to do differently before continuing.



LOCAL FOOD OPTIONS

One of the biggest challenges to purchasing local food is knowing all the different options for how and where to buy it. Here we describe the main ways centers purchase local food. These descriptions, as well as the “Local Food Decision Tree” (Appendix 1) and “Local Food Resources” (Appendix 4), will help you determine which combination of these many options works best for your center.

Broadline distributors. These are the companies that staff at most childcare centers are familiar with. Broadline distributors deliver canned goods, milk, paper supplies, and other items. More and more, these companies are offering local food options. It may be up to the director or nutritionist at your center to ask for the weekly list of local food options, or to work with your vendor to develop a system to identify what items are local. See “Guide to Communicating with Vendors” (Appendix 3) for details and a template on how to engage with a broadline distributor.

Produce distributors. Distributors are similar to broadliners, except these companies deliver only produce from around the world. Centers will need to inquire with distributors about which of their products are local and what local means to them.

Food hubs. Food hubs are produce distributors that have a specific dedication to sourcing and delivering only local food. Food hubs focus on providing very fresh, minimally processed and regionally identifiable (you know exactly where it is coming from) products to customers. Many food hubs also have a social mission to buy from traditionally underserved farmers and to make sure healthy food gets to the people who need it most, including childcare centers. Presently, not all counties have food hubs, but those that do can take advantage of the diverse and seasonal options food hubs offer.



Grocery stores. Many grocery stores are beginning to offer local items that our state produces in great quantities, such as sweet potatoes, collard greens, and strawberries. Some even carry frozen local food. If your grocery store does not have any food that is clearly labeled as local, ask the produce manager or shop around with other stores in your area.

Produce stands. During the warmer months, farmers in your area may open roadside stands to sell their local products. These options can be convenient in the summer and when they are near your center or other shopping locations. Check out ncfarmfresh.com for a list of roadside stands and farmers markets in North Carolina.

Farmer direct. Farmers can partner with your center to either deliver or have you pick up local food from a convenient meeting location (like a farmers market). Buying straight from a farmer offers the opportunity for an educational experience if the farmer’s time permits.



Farmers markets. These markets offer a great opportunity for centers to pick and choose exactly the local food they want. Try to find a market that fits your shopping schedule as the hours and days when farmers markets are open can be a challenge for center staff picking up local food. Farmers markets are great places to meet farmers in your region. If you purchase in quantity, you may be able to communicate with each farmer ahead of time to place orders and then use the market as a meetup point.

Community supported agriculture (CSA). CSAs are subscriptions to a single-family-sized box of fresh, in-season produce. There are two major types of CSA services: seasonal and year-long. Seasonal CSAs come directly from a farmer or farmer group, providing whatever is seasonally available in set quantities, requiring customers to pay for a box of food (either upfront or week-to-week) that is then delivered on a weekly basis. Year-long CSAs are

operated by businesses or other organizations that deliver produce year-round by using many regional farmers and often allowing for more flexible ordering and payment methods. Make sure you find out how much food comes in your box because the variety of items might be perfect for taste tests, but not enough of any one thing for preparing meals. Some farmers are willing to create a special CSA box for childcare centers so that you can customize your order. You can also see if parents or staff at your center are interested in signing up for a CSA and using your center as a drop-off site, which would help with distribution and expand the market for farmers.

Centralized kitchen or catering services. Childcare centers that use centralized kitchens or catering services can encourage their service to begin buying local food through one of the options mentioned above.



BEST PRACTICES FOR BUYING LOCAL FOOD

It can be challenging to make the switch to fresh, local food and still keep your center running smoothly when you first start out. Don't worry! It is natural to find buying locally difficult starting out, but it will only get easier as your center tries new local food options over the course of the year. Below you will find a few best practices for making farm to ECE a success.

Be a Good Business Partner

- Once you have chosen a local food option, stick with it for a few months before deciding if you want to switch. Especially for local food, as the seasons change, food options and prices will change as well, giving you new products to look forward to each month.
- Be aware of what your local food partner can and cannot do. For instance, working with a farmer can be a great experience for children to learn from, but be aware of requesting a farmer's time because time spent away from the farm equals less food grown for the farmer!
- If you find that you're ordering low volumes of food, consider reaching out to neighboring centers. Placing orders together will increase the volume of your purchase. This may help with transportation challenges, since a farmer can justify delivering to you, you can share any delivery fees, or centers can take turns picking up orders.

Communicate Well

- Clearly determine the most effective method your center will use to communicate (such as phone calls, emails, or text messages) with your local food supplier right away, especially when you're working directly with a farmer. This will help avoid future headaches when it comes to delivery or food pick-up.
- Marketing the fact that you support local farmers is a great way to engage parents and encourage word of mouth interest in your center. Also, the farmer or distributor who supports local food can benefit if you share their name online or through other communication methods at your center.

Use Your Cooking Resources Wisely

- Cooks can be nervous about using more local products if they come in an unprocessed form. Having children's activities, including shucking corn or peeling sweet potatoes, can help reduce work time for the cook while teaching children about food and farming.
- Many cooks enjoy using more "whole foods" from local suppliers, finding pride in preparing these tasty new items. Giving cooks more control in the kitchen to choose local menu items or even purchase the items for the center has been demonstrated to improve cooks taking ownership of meal time.
- Smaller, kid-sized fruits and vegetables can be hard for farmers to sell to their normal markets but may fit perfectly to meet U.S. Department of Agriculture standards for servings. For example, sweet potatoes that are smaller than those found in the supermarket could be the perfect size to serve to children and help farmers sell an otherwise unmarketable product. Ask your produce vendor if purchasing small items could benefit them or lower prices for the center.
- Don't forget about local meat and seafood! Although these items can be more expensive than non-local protein sources, North Carolina has diverse farms and resources related to meat and seafood. Consider buying smaller quantities of these items and finding ways to stretch them. For example, if you make a chili with local beef, add beans so you can use less meat and still have enough protein.

Celebrate Diversity

Some centers have enjoyed working with a farmer who is the same race as the majority of children in their center. Celebrating the diversity of people who work in agriculture with your distributor or farmer-partner can be one way to encourage your center to start a conversation about race equity in the food system.

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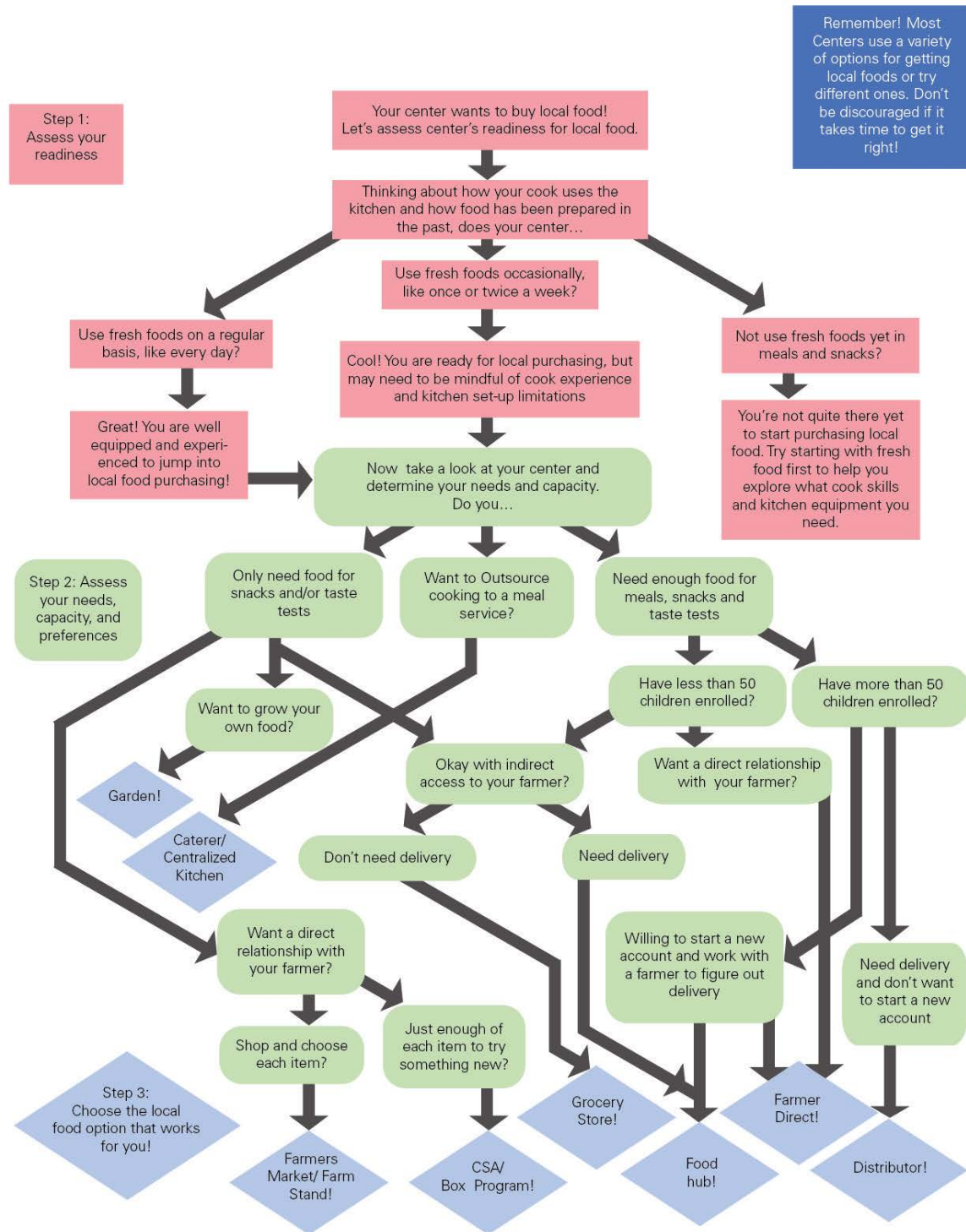
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Appendix 1. Local Food Decision Tree



Appendix 2. Menu Analysis Worksheet

Product	Type	Current Purchasing Method	Purchase Frequency	Purchase Quantity	Times served per week/day	When in Season
Vegetables Example: green beans	Canned	Broadline distributor	Twice a month	Twice a week	May- September	
Fruits Example: apples	Fresh	Produce Distributor	Once a month	Once a day	August- February	

This document was adapted from: Murphy, J., Smith, J. and Matts C. (2015). Farm to Early Childhood Programs: A Step by Step Guide. East Lansing, MI: Center for Regional Food Systems, Michigan State University. https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/farm_to_early_childhood_guide

Appendix 3. Guide to Communicating with Vendors

Distributor or Caterer

[Center Name] is currently participating in a farm-to-early care and education program. As part of this program, we are interested in increasing our purchases of locally grown fruits, vegetables, and proteins for use in meals and snacks. We look forward to working with you to increase our purchases of local food.

- In order to purchase more local food, we would like some additional information from you.
- Do you currently purchase local food?
- Where do you purchase local food from, and what is your definition of “local”?
- What type of information can you provide to us about the local farmers you purchase from?
- What requirements do you have for the local farmers that you purchase from in terms of food safety and liability insurance?
- How do you label and/or track local food?
- How can I find out about local food availability, and how can I designate that I want local food when ordering?
- Do you have a price list for local food?

Assessing a Distributor’s Response

Here are some things you should know about food safety and liability insurance to help you assess a vendor’s responses:

Food safety. The most common food safety certification is called Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). There are many different companies and organizations that will inspect a farm so that they can get their GAP certification (including Primus, USDA). GAP certification means that a farm has followed a set of standards to try and reduce the possibility of contamination. Many farmers will obtain GAP certification only if their buyer demands it, so there are also a lot of farmers who aren’t certified but who still use good food safety practices. If you are interested in buying from a farmer who isn’t GAP certified, you can ask them if they’ve taken any food safety training or if they have a food safety plan in place. You can also talk to your local Cooperative Extension agriculture

agent to find out which local farms have taken food safety trainings. The Food and Drug Administration is also in the process of implementing food safety standards under the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). However, farmers who sell locally and below a certain threshold will be exempt from getting FSMA certification.

Liability insurance. It is up to you whether you want to require that the farmers that you purchase from have liability insurance, as there are no federal requirements. Different distribution and food service companies have different requirements, so if you are interested, you can ask the vendor you purchase from what their requirements are. If you are purchasing from an individual farmer, \$1 million in liability insurance would be a reasonable amount to expect.

This information was adapted from: Murphy, J., Smith, J. and Matts C. (2015). *Farm to Early Childhood Programs: A Step by Step Guide*. East Lansing, MI: Center for Regional Food Systems, Michigan State University. https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/farm_to_early_childhood_guide

Farmer

[Center Name] is currently participating in a farm-to-early care and education program, in collaboration with the Center for Environmental Farming Systems. As part of this program, we are interested in increasing our purchases of locally grown fruits, vegetables, and proteins for use in meals and snacks. We are interested in purchasing food from you, but first we would like to have a conversation with you that addresses the following questions:

- What type of produce do you grow or livestock do you raise, and when is each product typically available?
- What is your liability coverage?
- What are your payment terms and expectations (such as cash on delivery or other terms)?
- Please describe your food safety practices and any relevant certifications that you have.
- Please explain your credit and return policy for products of unacceptable quality
- Are you available to visit our program and talk to children about farming or to host a farm visit?

- Are you willing to deliver to more than one location?
- Do you offer discount prices for bulk purchases? If so, what volume would we need to purchase to get that price?

Other Considerations

Some farmers prefer cash on delivery rather than waiting for an invoice to be paid. Make sure that the farmer's payment terms fit your accounting cycle.

While a farmer may not have a specific policy, asking upfront about quality expectations can help you develop a system. For example, maybe you and the farmer inspect the produce when it's delivered and address any issues before payment. Communicating clearly about your quality expectations will help to avoid unnecessary issues.

If you cooperate with other centers so that you can order higher volumes, you may need to choose a single drop-off point, unless a farmer is willing to deliver to multiple locations.

Appendix 4. Local Food Resources

Resources for Finding Local Producers

North Carolina Farm Fresh is a directory of pick-your-own farms, roadside stands, and farmers markets throughout North Carolina. It is designed to help the consumer find the freshest locally grown fruits, vegetables, Christmas trees, ornamental plants, flowers and herbs.

ncfarmfresh.com

The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) Wholesale Guide is a farm-to-business directory for the Western Carolinas. It provides a quick, searchable tool to discover farms, distributors, and stores that carry a wide variety of local food. Most entries also include detailed information about minimum ordering sizes, certifications, and modes of contact.

appalachiangrown.org/wholesale/index

LocalHarvestSM is a website that helps consumers find a wide variety of locally grown fruits, vegetables, and much more throughout the state and beyond. Just search your area website for products of interest to find nearby farms, CSAs, and other options for purchasing local food.

localharvest.org/raleigh-nc

Other Local Food Purchasing Guides

Farm to Early Childhood Program, a Step-by-step Guide

This guide has more tools and worksheets to help childcare centers figure out the best ways to procure local food for their centers. While it is specific to Michigan, some of the activities may still be interesting to centers hoping to improve their local food purchasing.

foodsystems.msu.edu/uploads/files/farm-to-early-childhood_guide.pdf

Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions

This publication is a basic introduction to the opportunities in farm to institution. It provides interesting and insightful examples of childcare centers in different states that have successfully implemented farm to childcare.

farmtopreschool.org/documents/local-foods-to-local-institutions.pdf

Local Food for Little Eaters: A Purchasing Toolbox for the Child and Adult Care Food Program

AND

Local Food for Little Eaters: A Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Guide to Local Food Purchasing

These two guides provide in-depth information about different models that centers can use to purchase local food and ensure that they comply with CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program) and Migrant Head Start standards

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/local-food-for-little-eaters>

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/local-food-for-little-eaters-a-migrant-seasonal-head-start-guide-to-local-food-purchasing>

General Resources

NC Cooperative Extension Local Food Portal

This webpage hosted by NC Cooperative Extension is a resource for all things local. If you're looking for more information and education about local markets, cooking local food, or connecting with like-minded organizations, this site can help you get the information you need.

<https://localfood.ces.ncsu.edu/>

National Farm to School and Preschool Websites

As the hub for farm to school information and community building, the National Farm to School Network website is full of interesting articles, free curricula, and graphics that centers can use to

promote their farm to childcare activities. Both the websites below are useful for finding resources from partners around the country.

<http://www.farmentoschool.org/our-work/early-care-and-education>

Local food in the CACFP

A short question-and-answer document concerning reimbursement for local food and resources using the CACFP:

nutritionnc.com/snp/pdf/cacfp/memos/15-06-LocalFoodintheCACFPwithQuestionsandAnswers.pdf

Calculating How Much to Purchase

There are several guides that help centers translate serving sizes into quantities that distributors and farmers will understand:

Food Buying Guide/Calculator for Child Nutrition Programs

<https://foodbuyingguide.fns.usda.gov/>

Making Michigan Recipes Work from Menu to Tray

<https://www.cultivatemichigan.org/sites/default/files/documents/MMRW-MenuPlanningGuide.pdf>

North Carolina Produce Availability Chart

<http://www.gottobenc.com/find-nc-products/produce-availability>

Oklahoma Farm to School Program Produce Calculator

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKEwjNkajo7fzeAhUSeKwKHW-4DocQFjAAegQIABAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fokfarmtoschool.com%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2Fproduce-calculator-excel07.xlsx&usq=AOvVaw1VVNWI8cfpsXVMh2heBHFm>

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