

Bellingham residents eat locally

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The streets of Bellingham are peppered with cars and bicycles sporting “Buy Local, Eat Local” bumper stickers. But what does it mean?



Western alumnus Josh Schmidt, a produce clerk at the Bellingham Community Food Co-op, stocks carrots from Hopewell Organic Farm. The farm distributes food to places around Bellingham, as well as Growing Whatcom CSA. // photo by Colin Diltz

In Bellingham, it means eating food from one of the 67 farms operating within Whatcom County. Local farms let customers buy produce directly from their harvest through a program called Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA.

“Members of [the program] invest in a farm at the beginning of a season when revenue for a farmer is low, but their costs are high,” said Jay Dennison, director of Growing Whatcom CSA.

The farmer gets the money up front, and then the customer receives a box of food each week directly from the farms, Dennison said.

When someone invests in the program, the money paid at the start of the season guarantees that person fresh produce, usually grown within 20 miles of their home, Dennison said. Their money strengthens the local economy and helps support organic farming, he said.

“All the farms we work with grow sustainably and naturally to take care of the environment on the farmer’s end. Members benefit in the end from our bountiful harvest,” Dennison said.

Dennison said Grow Whatcom CSA uses produce from multiple farms to provide members with the freshest fruits and vegetables at a value price. He said large boxes containing 12 items cost \$36 per week and small boxes have eight items and cost \$24 per week, or about \$3 per item.

A food box could consist of a head of lettuce, a box of raspberries, a pound and a half of apples and more, Dennison said.

Dennison said food boxes are distributed to drop-off locations throughout Whatcom County during the summer and winter growing seasons, which last between June and December.

Washington State Department of Ecology worker Laura Krupa said she has been eating locally for years. She said she does not belong to the program in Bellingham, but she belonged to one when she lived in California.

“It was more than enough food every week, I actually split it with a couple people and still had enough to eat,” Krupa said.

Krupa said she buys local produce from the Bellingham Farmers Market and the Bellingham and Skagit Valley food co-ops. She said she loves eating Bellingham-grown heirloom tomatoes and garlic.

Dennison said Growing Whatcom CSA is likely the largest in the Bellingham area. It is in its fifth year of operation. The program is different in that it works with multiple farms and allows members to use their website to choose the products they receive in their box.

“Historically, the drawback for the customer might be getting a monotonous food box with the same items over and over,” Dennison said. “But our new program lets people choose what’s going in their box every week.”

The organization dodges problems associated with a crop failure because it works with 12 to 15 farms each season, Dennison said. Customers are guaranteed a large selection of different foods from several local sources, he said.

Fruits and vegetables are not the only foods people can eat locally. Grow Whatcom CSA customers can purchase add-ons to supplement their food boxes, such as eggs, butter, milk, sour cream, cheese, bread and roasted coffee.