

Organic on a Budget

Tips for buying healthy food without breaking the bank

A fact sheet from Toxic Free NC

The benefits of organically-grown foods are many: organic farming reduces pollution, uses no chemical pesticides and fertilizers, promotes biodiversity and brings a fairer price to farmers for their products. But there can be drawbacks as well: because “conventional farming” externalizes many of their environmental costs, and often receives large subsidies that organic farming does not, there can be a big difference in the price of these items at the grocery store. As a result, organically-grown foods are out of reach for many families, and for other families it may take significant re-prioritizing to fit them into the grocery budget. But does it have to be this way? Organic foods can fit into a modest food budget – it just takes a little know-how.

*** At the grocery store**

The grocery store is undoubtedly the most expensive place to buy your organic fruits and veggies. One way to reduce your checkout bill is knowing which products are higher and lower in pesticide residues, and purchasing the “conventional” option when the price is much lower. Environmental Working Group has produced a wallet-sized card that you can download and carry with you as a guide at the grocery store (get the wallet card at www.foodnews.org). Shopping at a co-op grocery is another way to reduce your cost – often a co-op membership entitles you to significant discounts on everything in the store.

Foods Highest in Pesticide Residues	Foods Lowest in Pesticide Residues
1. Apples	1. Onions
2. Celery	2. Sweet Corn
3. Strawberries	3. Pineapples
4. Peaches	4. Avocado
5. Spinach	5. Asparagus
6. Nectarines (imported)	6. Sweet Peas
7. Grapes (imported)	7. Mangoes
8. Sweet bell peppers	8. Eggplant
9. Potatoes	9. Cantaloupe (domestic)
10. Blueberries (domestic)	10. Kiwi
11. Lettuce	11. Cabbage
12. Kale/collard greens	12. Watermelon

Source: Environmental Working Group 2011

*** At the farmer’s market**

Buying at the farmer’s market eliminates the middle-man, and lets you buy produce that comes from just a few miles away, rather than from California or halfway around the world. Prices on organic produce are often significantly lower at the farmer’s market than in a retail store. When you buy from the farmer, you can also ask about how the food is grown, what their labor practices are like, and learn a lot more about best ways to prepare and serve your fresh produce.

* **Straight from the farm**

If you're interested in saving on your food budget and eating with the seasons, joining a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm is an excellent option. Members buy a "share" in the farm early in the year, and then enjoy deliveries of fresh, seasonal produce throughout the growing season. Some farms allow members to purchase work shares that further reduce the cost and involve members in producing the food they will eat. Toxic Free NC staffers belong to a CSA that costs \$475 for 24 weeks of produce – that's about \$20 a week for enough fresh organic produce to feed a family of four. Work shares reduce the cost to about \$17/week at our CSA. To find a CSA in your area, check out www.growingsmallfarms.org, or www.localharvest.org.

* **In your own backyard**

By far the cheapest way to get a bounty of organic produce is to grow it yourself. You don't need to be a master gardener to grow some of your favorite foods. If you're a new gardener, focus on the foods you like best. Hooked on expensive salad greens? You can grow a salad bar on your back patio, and by selecting seasonal varieties, gardeners in North Carolina can have fresh greens throughout much of the year. Are berries your weakness? Start a strawberry patch. Share some with the birds, eat some yourself, and freeze them to enjoy all winter long.

Some more money-saving tips:

* **Grow your own gourmet.** What's your most expensive indulgence at the grocery store? If it's pesto, grow basil. If it's fancy salad greens, grow those. If it's hot and spicy salsa, grow a selection of peppers, tomatoes and garlic on your patio.

* **Freeze some of the bounty.** Growing and picking your own produce can sometimes overwhelm you with fresh food. Freezer bags make it easy to store your bumper crop for the winter – just wash, dry and freeze. Great foods for freezing include: roma tomatoes, sweet corn, berries, peaches, home-made salsa and tomato sauce, and fresh herbs (chop them and freeze them with a little water in ice cube trays). [More tips on freezing: <http://life.familyeducation.com/foods/safety/36570.html>]

* **Mulch, compost and seeds – go local.** Retail garden stores can turn a money-saving venture into a spending spree, but you really don't have to spend much to start a garden. Many cities and counties offer backyard mulch and compost in bulk at very low prices. If the quantity is too much for you, share with neighbors and friends. Seeds and plants can often be obtained at local seed and plant swaps for low or even no cost.

* **Skip the bottled water.** Bottled water is resource-intensive and basically unregulated. There's no guarantee of the purity of what's in commercial bottled water, but tap water must meet federal drinking water standards. Using a home filter, such as a Brita or Pür pitcher, costs only about 35 cents per gallon (compared to \$1.29 for one 20 oz bottle of Dasani water, for example) and provides extremely clean water.