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Local and affordable: Massachusetts-grown produce less expensive than grocery store produce

Peaches, cucumbers, tomatoes, basil, and dozens of other varieties of fresh produce are grown and harvested at farms around Massachusetts every summer, much of it by farmers who sell their products directly to customers at farmstands and farmers markets. Massachusetts is a national leader in direct-to-consumer sales of local produce, with nearly 300 farmers markets serving customers throughout the state.

Consumers seek out local produce because they know it's fresh, they know that their purchases help support local farmers and their communities' economy, and they know that local foods taste great. Price is also a driving factor for consumers' shopping choices, though, and many believe that shopping at farmers markets is less affordable than other options. That turns out to not be the case.

Fresh produce purchased directly from farmers at Massachusetts farmers markets tends to be less expensive than similar items purchased from grocery stores. That's according to a survey conducted by the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative at 11 farmers markets and 22 grocery stores around the State. Cucumbers were, on average, 42% less expensive at farmers markets, for example, and basil fully 50% less. Average prices for cabbage, leaf lettuce, romaine, cauliflower, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, chard, peaches, strawberries, blueberries, basil, and mint were all less expensive at farmers markets. Only summer squash/zucchini were more affordable at grocery stores. **Overall, a basket of an equivalent portion of each item would cost consumers an average of 25% less at farmers markets than it would at grocery stores.**

Conducted in July and August 2018, the project surveyed farmers markets in 10 communities, and grocery stores within five miles of the markets. Markets were chosen to be broadly representative of different regions of the State, with a focus on population centers that, in aggregate, are accessible to a majority of shoppers in the State. Prices varied regionally, with some items priced higher at markets in some cities and towns.

At each market and grocery store prices for 14 items currently in season in Massachusetts were recorded. If multiple vendors at a farmers market carried the items or if there was a range of choices at a grocery store a median price was determined. Items were selected based on what was in season at the time of the survey, with an eye toward commonly used products. When multiple varieties of a type of produce were available, every effort was made to compare products that were as similar as possible based on growing practices (conventional vs. organic), variety, and other factors. At markets where mint and basil were only available as plants, their value was calculated by estimating each plant would generate 5 oz. of the herb.

As well as being affordable, purchasing food directly from farmers has positive implications for local farms, the local economy, the environment, and public health. Local farmers are able to charge a fair price when selling directly to consumers, which enables them to create jobs and purchase more local goods and services, keeping that spending in Massachusetts. Sustainable farms help keep farmland in active production, and are better able to use management practices that protect and enhance natural resources and the environment.

For information about locations and operating hours of farmers markets in MA, see <https://massnrc.org/farmlocator/map.aspx>, or one of the nine Buy Local organizations around the state here: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/buy-local-groups>.

The survey was conducted by Savannah McCarthy for the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, and was funded by the UMass Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment.

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Massachusetts Averages

	Farmers Markets	Grocery Stores	Percent savings at farmers markets
Cabbage	\$1.41/lb	\$1.88/lb	25%
Leaf lettuce	\$4.16/lb	\$5.17/lb	19%
Romaine	\$2.36/lb	\$3.81/lb	38%
Cauliflower	\$1.89/lb	\$2.30/lb	18%
Carrots	\$1.20/lb	\$1.53/lb	21%
Cucumbers	\$0.88/lb	\$1.51/lb	42%
Tomatoes	\$1.79/lb	\$2.21/lb	19%
Chard	\$1.72/lb	\$2.54/lb	32%
Summer squash/zucchini	\$2.14/lb	\$2.06/lb	(-4%)
Peaches	\$1.15/lb	\$1.67/lb	31%
Strawberries	\$4.11/lb	\$5.25/lb	22%
Blueberries	\$3.68/lb	\$4.67/lb	21%
Basil	\$1.14/oz	\$2.29/oz	50%
Mint	\$1.54/oz	\$2.20/oz	30%
Total for one unit of each	\$29.18	\$39.07	25%

Notes:

This table above indicates the statewide averages of the price of 14 items at farmers markets and at grocery stores. These results aggregate the regional data found on the next pages.

Note that this was not a statistically significant representation of all grocery stores and farmers markets within the state. It is derived from a collection of randomized data points of farmers markets with consistent parameters for neighboring grocery stores, which provides a picture of how the prices of each good is generally reflected in each location. The findings are specific to each individual location, and the summary data represents an average of information collected at these locations. All farmers markets are independent and prices are set by the individual farmers. Prices at markets or grocery stores not included in this survey may fall outside of these findings.

Boston

	Farmers Markets	Grocery Stores
Cabbage	\$1.88/lb	\$2.92/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$5.72/lb	\$4.83/lb
Romaine	\$3.09/lb	\$2.73/lb
Cauliflower	\$1.99/lb	\$2.43/lb
Carrots	\$2.00/lb	\$1.49/lb
Cucumbers	\$1.90/lb	\$1.56/lb
Tomatoes	\$4.00/lb	\$2.16/lb
Chard	\$2.43/lb	\$3.00/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$2.75/lb	\$2.23/lb
Peaches	\$1.65/lb	\$1.46/lb
Strawberries	\$4.99/lb	\$5.66/lb
Blueberries	\$4.75/lb	\$4.66/lb
Basil	\$1.00/oz	\$2.00/oz
Mint	\$3.00/oz	\$2.00/oz

Notes on Boston survey:

Farmers markets surveyed: Copley Square and Boston Public Market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Star Market, Whole Foods, and Trader Joes.

Cambridge

	Farmers Market	Grocery Stores
Cabbage	\$2.00/lb	\$2.59/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$1.99/lb	\$5.52/lb
Romaine	\$1.50/lb	\$2.59/lb
Cauliflower	\$0.69/lb	\$2.43/lb
Carrots	\$0.99/lb	\$1.56/lb
Cucumbers	\$0.50/lb	\$2.09/lb
Tomatoes	\$1.99/lb	\$2.19/lb
Chard	\$2.00/lb	\$3.00/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$3.00/lb	\$2.06/lb
Peaches	\$0.69/lb	\$1.49/lb
Strawberries	\$3.99/lb	\$5.53/lb
Blueberries	\$3.99/lb	\$5.66/lb
Basil	\$1.20/oz	\$2.00/oz
Mint	\$0.75/oz	\$2.00/oz

Notes on Cambridge survey:

Farmers markets surveyed: Charles Square farmers market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Trader Joes, Whole Foods, and Wholesome Fresh. Note that these stores carried only organic produce for many of these products, which tends to be priced higher than the conventional produce priced at the market.

Greenfield

	Farmers Market	Grocery Stores
Cabbage	\$1.25/lb	\$1.84/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$4.75/lb	\$4.60/lb
Romaine	\$1.79/lb	\$4.80/lb
Cauliflower	\$3.00/lb	\$1.99/lb
Carrots	\$.99/lb	\$1.19/lb
Cucumbers	\$1.69/lb	\$1.76/lb
Tomatoes	\$1.99/lb	\$1.99/lb
Chard	\$2.00/lb	\$2.20/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$1.69/lb	\$2.10/lb
Peaches	\$0.69/lb	\$1.49/lb
Strawberries	\$3.50/lb	\$4.66/lb
Blueberries	\$1.40/lb	\$3.99/lb
Basil	\$1.50/oz	\$2.49/oz
Mint	\$0.33/oz	\$1.99/oz

Notes on Greenfield survey:

Farmers markets surveyed: Greenfield Farmers Market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Green Fields Market, Fosters Supermarket, and Big Y.

Lee

	Farmers Market	Grocery Store
Cabbage	\$0.50/lb	\$0.69/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$1.50/lb	\$1.99/lb
Romaine	\$1.60/lb	\$1.24/lb
Cauliflower	\$0.57/lb	\$2.85/lb
Carrots	\$0.99/lb	\$3.25/lb
Cucumbers	\$0.40/lb	\$1.13/lb
Tomatoes	\$0.90/lb	\$2.29/lb
Chard	\$1.30/lb	\$3.15/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$2.00/lb	\$2.49/lb
Peaches	\$0.99/lb	\$2.99/lb
Strawberries	\$3.00/lb	\$2.99/lb
Blueberries	\$2.50/lb	\$2.15/lb
Basil	n/a	\$1.99/oz
Mint	\$0.53/oz	\$1.99/oz

Notes on Lee survey:

Farmers markets surveyed: Main Street market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Big Y of Lee.

Lynn

	Farmers Market	Grocery Stores
Cabbage	\$1.99/lb	\$1.79/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$6.50/lb	\$7.60/lb
Romaine	\$3.50/lb	\$3.75/lb
Cauliflower	\$1.99/lb	\$1.99/lb
Carrots	\$1.29/lb	\$1.89/lb
Cucumbers	\$0.99/lb	\$2.25/lb
Tomatoes	\$2.49/lb	\$2.99/lb
Chard	\$2.00/lb	\$2.99/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$2.50/lb	\$2.75/lb
Peaches	\$2.50/lb	\$2.14/lb
Strawberries	\$4.99/lb	\$5.99/lb
Blueberries	\$3.99/lb	\$4.99/lb
Basil	\$1.25/oz	\$3.00/oz
Mint	\$3.00/oz	n/a

Notes on Lynn survey:

Farmers markets surveyed: Union Square market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Bonao Grocery and Contras Grocery.

Northampton

	Farmers Market	Grocery Stores
Cabbage	\$0.70/lb	\$0.91/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$2.50/lb	\$4.86/lb
Romaine	\$2.00/lb	\$5.22/lb
Cauliflower	\$0.59/lb	\$2.18/lb
Carrots	\$0.49/lb	\$1.06/lb
Cucumbers	\$0.30/lb	\$0.88/lb
Tomatoes	\$0.99/lb	\$1.73/lb
Chard	\$1.15/lb	\$2.75/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$1.00/lb	\$1.62/lb
Peaches	\$1.00/lb	\$1.32/lb
Strawberries	\$3.80/lb	\$4.33/lb
Blueberries	\$4.00/lb	\$4.22/lb
Basil	\$1.00/oz	\$2.16/oz
Mint	\$1.00/oz	\$2.16/oz

Notes on Northampton survey:

Farmers markets surveyed: Gothic Street market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Big Y, Stop & Shop, and River Valley Co-Op.

Shelburne

	Farmers Market	Grocery Store
Cabbage	\$0.69/lb	\$0.99/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$4.28/lb	\$8.58/lb
Romaine	\$1.99/lb	\$2.90/lb
Cauliflower	n/a	\$1.75/lb
Carrots	\$1.00/lb	\$0.79/lb
Cucumbers	\$0.40/lb	\$1.21/lb
Tomatoes	\$0.59/lb	\$1.99/lb
Chard	\$1.29/lb	n/a
Summer squash/zucchini	\$2.00/lb	\$1.49/lb
Peaches	\$0.50/lb	N/A
Strawberries	\$2.80/lb	\$4.99/lb
Blueberries	\$2.25/lb	\$3.99/lb
Basil	\$1.00/oz	\$1.99/oz
Mint	\$0.38/oz	\$1.99/oz

Notes on Shelburne survey:

Farmers markets surveyed: Main Street Market, which was surveyed.

Grocery stores surveyed: Keystone Market.

Somerville

	Farmers Market	Grocery Stores
Cabbage	\$1.59/lb	\$1.92/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$5.20/lb	\$5.90/lb
Romaine	\$2.66/lb	\$5.90/lb
Cauliflower	\$1.30/lb	\$2.25/lb
Carrots	\$1.29/lb	\$1.49/lb
Cucumbers	\$0.79/lb	\$1.39/lb
Tomatoes	\$1.00/lb	\$2.50/lb
Chard	\$2.08/lb	\$2.89/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$2.50/lb	\$1.84/lb
Peaches	\$1.50/lb	\$1.74/lb
Strawberries	\$5.00/lb	\$6.49/lb
Blueberries	\$4.99/lb	\$5.49/lb
Basil	\$1.20/oz	\$2.25/oz
Mint	\$3.00/oz	\$2.25/oz

Notes on Somerville survey:

Farmers market surveyed: Davis Square market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Stop & Shop and bFresh.

Springfield

	Farmers Market	Grocery Stores
Cabbage	\$1.50/lb	\$1.86/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$4.20/lb	\$3.88/lb
Romaine	\$1.50/lb	\$3.10/lb
Cauliflower	\$3.00/lb	\$2.25/lb
Carrots	\$0.99/lb	\$1.72/lb
Cucumbers	\$0.50/lb	\$1.06/lb
Tomatoes	\$0.99/lb	\$2.09/lb
Chard	\$1.00/lb	\$2.49/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$1.50/lb	\$2.02/lb
Peaches	\$0.49/lb	\$1.75/lb
Strawberries	\$3.99/lb	\$5.32/lb
Blueberries	\$4.99/lb	\$4.99/lb
Basil	\$1.00/oz	\$2.49/oz
Mint	\$0.38/oz	\$2.50/oz

Notes on Springfield survey:

Farmers market surveyed: Tower Square farmers market.

Grocery stores surveyed: Plaza Market, Organic Victory Market, and Big Y.

Worcester

	Farmers Market	Grocery Store
Cabbage	\$2.00/lb	\$1.99/lb
Leaf lettuce	\$5.00/lb	\$6.99/lb
Romaine	\$3.99/lb	\$4.99/lb
Cauliflower	\$1.99/lb	\$3.00/lb
Carrots	\$1.99/lb	\$1.69/lb
Cucumbers	\$1.29/lb	\$1.50/lb
Tomatoes	\$2.99/lb	\$2.99/lb
Chard	\$2.00/lb	\$2.29/lb
Summer squash/zucchini	\$2.50/lb	\$1.99/lb
Peaches	\$1.50/lb	\$1.79/lb
Strawberries	\$4.99/lb	\$5.99/lb
Blueberries	\$3.99/lb	\$4.99/lb
Basil	\$1.40/oz	\$3.00/oz
Mint	\$3.00/oz	\$3.00/oz

Notes on Worcester survey:

Farmers market surveyed: Main Street farmers market.

Grocery store surveyed: Price Chopper.