

Abundant food—it takes all of agriculture

By Lynne Finnerty

There's a lot of excitement these days about buying food from local farmers. It is a win-win-win. Consumers get fresh produce and maybe even cheese, eggs and meat. Farmers and ranchers make more money by selling directly to consumers. Supporting those farmers also helps support the local economy.

But when was the last time you saw a sack of flour, sugar or cornmeal at your farmers' market? We can't buy everything we want to eat or cook with from within a hundred miles or so—a goal that some have established for themselves. It takes all kinds of farms across the country to provide the staples we depend on and expect to see stacked aplenty at our grocery store.

The Agriculture Department advises in its Dietary Guidelines that we should eat a variety of foods. Reality is that most of us eat from a variety of food sources, too. Why does it have to be all or nothing?

I grew up a country girl. We didn't have any money trees so we planted fruit trees and a big vegetable garden every summer to stretch the food budget. My dad was a child of the Great Depression and he planted a garden to ensure that, like Scarlett O'Hara, we would "never go hungry again!" Sweet potatoes were one of his favorites so we always had a few rows of those along with tomatoes, squash, bell peppers, green beans, butter beans, field peas, sweet corn, okra, cucumbers, cabbage, "Irish" potatoes and just about anything else my dad planted to see what it would do.

Kids who didn't like vegetables were hard for me to understand. Our fresh vegetables were so good, I developed a taste for them as soon as I was big enough to wander out into the garden and eat tomatoes off the vine like nature's candy.

I know the seductiveness of a ripe, farm-fresh tomato. That's why, now that I'm a city girl, I'm one of the first ones lined up at the farmers' market on a Saturday morning. As delighted as I am to support my local farmers and buy locally grown peaches and other treasures, I know I will need to stop by the store to pick up the essentials needed to turn the peaches into a cobbler. And while I'm there I might even buy some of those reviled "processed foods" we like to keep in the pantry, such as breakfast cereal to have with my farmers' market berries.

Buying local is trendy and that's great, but we owe some respect to the farm families who raise the staples, as well. We should all be thankful that somewhere on the high plains and rolling hills that may be thousands of miles from our homes, a farmer is working—probably late into the evening—against the odds presented by uncooperative weather, markets and governments—raising the grains, oilseeds, meats, dairy products and fruits and vegetables that round out our abundant and diverse food supply.

It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes a whole country to put a meal on the table.