



[The evolution of fresh food](#)

Going back to the land — or at least to the farmers’ market

By [Amy Halloran](#)
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Ten years ago, when I got a job managing a [farmers' market](#), a friend scoffed, “Nobody grows food around here anymore!”

“Well,” I countered, confused and uncertain, “at least 10 people do, and they’re bringing their food to the city every Saturday.”

Today that market is bursting at the seams, with almost 60 vendors and thousands of weekly visitors. Across the country, the number of operating farmers’ markets has [more than doubled](#) in the past decade. More and more Americans are [growing their own vegetables at home](#), including First Lady [Michelle Obama](#). And new [artisanal-food](#) and [local-food](#) ventures keep launching, even in this stricken economy.



The farmers' market is a good place to find green food.

I don’t run the market anymore, but I watch from the sidelines, impressed. I couldn’t have imagined that so many people would become familiar with fresh, locally grown food. I had no clue

that [locavorism](#) would become so popular that both [McDonald's](#) and [Walmart](#) would appropriate the idea, proclaiming which of their ingredients and products were locally sourced.

Will this love for fresh food last? Or will “local” soon be forgotten, the next victim of fashion?

[Olestra](#) pancakes with backyard zucchini, anyone?

When I was growing up in the 1970s, the back-to-the-land movement was vacuuming people out of cities and depositing them in the country. I played with homesteaders made of plastic, pushing the long-haired mom and dad of the [Sunshine Family](#) on a pedal-powered family tricycle, helping the dolls move their garden tools over patches of grass in the yard.



Winter food.

I wasn't aware of the community gardens that were springing up in many cities. Or the [1973 oil crisis](#) that spiked food prices and drove people to plant vegetable gardens. Or the food-safety problems caused by widespread pollution, [chemicals](#), and contaminants allowed by a weak FDA. I didn't know that the city nearest to me — Troy, New York — was making [Troy-Bilt rototillers](#) (90,000 of them in 1978 alone) and helping people pursue food self-sufficiency with these machines. [Garden](#)

[Way](#), the Troy-Bilt parent company, also published books to show customers how to use their products. (The books are now published by [Storey Publishing](#).)

I've learned all this in the last few years, as I've gotten more interested in gardening and preserving food. My local library has books both old and new on these topics; digging deeper, I've found scholarly titles on the back-to-the-land movement that trace the term all the way back to the late 1800s and early 1900s. I knew that my generation didn't invent gardening, but learning that we didn't invent urban agriculture — well, that was a shock.

Will the current interest in DIY and local food production last? It's hard to directly compare the very urban growth of [CSA memberships](#) and farmers' markets with the very rural trend in the 1970s of going off the grid entirely, leaving both society and commerce behind.

Yes, plenty of people are food-swapping and yard-sharing and otherwise bracing themselves for a time when time is a more valuable commodity than cold hard cash. But this grow-it-yourself moment is largely rooted in the commercial market. After all, people who identify with the modern movement for fresh foods can be as gaga about what they can buy as what they can make themselves.

Of course, the [urban-homesteading strand](#) of this great big love for fresh is less affected by consumer choices. Still, many people who are devoted to fresh are happy to be part of the retail loop. And that's not necessarily a bad thing; it might even make it more sustainable than the idea-driven leaps of yore. The question of the market's role came up recently while talking with a friend who has worked at two prominent farms in New York: [Stone Barns](#) and [Hawthorne Valley](#). [Sara Worden](#) is an artist and a young farmer. When I asked her to compare the 1970s and now, she said that her generation is more market-driven. People are growing for markets, she said, choosing where to farm based on where they can sell. If they are going back to the land, they are doing so with monetary sustenance, not just self-sufficiency, in mind.



Markets have flowered.

Another conversation developed at a food swap.

“I think that there was a sense in the 1970s of removing yourself from society when you did this,” said Dianna Goodwin, who described herself as a former dilettante homesteader. “This whole thing about leaving mainstream consumer society — that’s just not there now. Some people who are moving out to the country are probably doing something more like that, but they’re also more market-oriented, which is good. You need to be able to support yourself.”

I carry these thoughts with me as I tour the farmers’ market and watch the exchanges of money, food, and friendship. Even in a recession, and with new farmers’ markets opening up nearby, the piles of vegetables and bread start tall and vanish by day’s end. In the crowd, I see older couples who used to keep big gardens. They never lost their taste for homegrown tomatoes, even if they aren’t growing them at home anymore.

Maybe awakened taste buds are all that the love for fresh food needs to survive.

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