

Best Practices for Shoppers at the Farmers' Market¹

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This factsheet is part of the "Florida Farmers' Markets" series that is designed to provide valuable information to managers, vendors, and shoppers of Florida farmers' markets on essential topics for shopping at farmers' markets, including regulations, best practices, and marketing. This series serves as a useful guide to help improve the safety and marketability of Florida farmers' markets.

Farmers' markets offers a wonderful opportunity to buy fresh, local, and seasonal products while supporting your community and engaging directly with growers, vendors, and artisans. This factsheet provides essential information about farmers' markets and how to make the most of your visit. Whether you're visiting for the first time or you're a regular shopper, the tips included here will help you plan ahead, shop wisely, and handle your purchases safely so you can enjoy your market experience.

What is a farmers' market?

According to the Farmers Market Coalition (FMC), a farmers' market is a public and recurring assembly of farmers or their representatives who sell agricultural products directly to consumers (FMC 2025). Farmers' markets have a fixed location and are open to the public with a regular operating schedule. The most common agricultural products sold include fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, and grains. Farmers' markets offer several advantages over retail markets. First, they facilitate direct interactions between farmers, shoppers, and community. Second, by directly selling products to consumers without middlemen, farmers can earn more, and shoppers can purchase fresh local food from their area, which can boost the local economy.

What can I expect to find at a farmers' market?

Food products sold at local farmers' markets reflect the region's seasonal agricultural production. Farmers' markets vary in size and in the number and type of products available at the market. Generally, you can find a wide array of locally produced products, including fresh vegetables, fruits, baked goods, honey, eggs, cheese and other dairy products, jams and jellies, seafood, and meat products. Markets also offer non-food items such as plants

and other nursery stock, crafts, candles, and soaps. Some farmers' markets even hire musicians or other entertainers to enhance the market atmosphere. Some markets may allow pets if leashed, but directly check with the market for the rules.

How can I locate a farmers' market near me?

Farmers' markets can be found in various locations, including downtown areas, community parks, farms, and parking lots. To locate a farmers' market near you, use reliable resources such as the USDA National Farmers Market Directory and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) Community Farmers Market Locator. You can also contact your local UF/IFAS Extension offices for information about farmers' markets in your county.

Farmers' Market Tips for Shoppers

Before going to the market:

- **Plan your trip:** Get directions and check the market's hours and days of operation.
- **Consider your transportation:** If the market is nearby, walking or biking can be great options. If you drive, consider carpooling. Some markets have limited parking spots.
- **Bring reusable bags:** Reusable bags help reduce plastic waste. Choose bags with sturdy handles for easy carrying. Insulated bags or coolers are recommended if you plan to purchase cold or frozen foods. If you plan to buy in bulk, walk to the market, or shop with small children, a wagon with wheels can make transport easier.
- **Dress comfortably:** Most farmers' markets are held outdoors and may not have adequate shade or shelter. Dress comfortably and wear walking shoes. Wear sunscreen and consider bringing your sunglasses and a hat.
- **Make a shopping list:** Creating a shopping list ahead of time can help with your meal planning, shopping within your budget, and avoiding food waste.
- **Bring cash:** Although more vendors are now accepting major credit/debit cards and other payment forms, some vendors may still prefer cash and will not

take other forms. Plan to bring smaller bills and change.

- **Use EBT/SNAP and Fresh Access Bucks:** If your family qualifies, bring your EBT card/SNAP. Many farmers' markets in Florida participate in the Fresh Access Bucks (FAB) program and provide a one-to-one match for Florida-grown produce.

At the market:

- **Arrive early and take your time:** Getting there early gives you access to the freshest items and helps avoid crowds. If your schedule allows, walk through the entire market before making purchases to compare prices and discover new products.
- **Practice good etiquette and be flexible:** Farmers' markets can get busy. Be polite, patient, and mindful of others, especially during busy hours. Ask before touching products, and be open to substitutions if your preferred item is unavailable.
- **Connect with vendors and ask questions:** Many vendors enjoy sharing tips, recipes, and stories about how their products are grown or made. Ask whether products are local, organic, artisan, or homemade. Building relationships can enrich your shopping experience—don't forget to grab a business card if available.
- **Shop smart and seasonal:** In-season produce is often fresher, tastier, and more affordable. Check out the "Crops in Season" guide from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) to make informed choices.
- **Check quality and labels:** Use your senses to assess freshness—look for bruises, off-colors, or odd smells, and consider texture.
- **For processed foods** like jams, breads, or sauces, check the label for any allergens or dietary restrictions. If labels are unclear, ask the vendor directly.
- **Pack items carefully:** When placing purchases in your bags or cooler, layer heavier items at the bottom and lighter ones on top to prevent damage.

Leaving the market & at home:

- **Head home promptly and protect perishables:** After shopping, plan to go straight home or store your purchases in a cooler or an insulated bag. Perishable items should not be left out more than 1 to 2 hours, especially in warm weather. If you need to make stops before heading home, bring a cooler with ice packs to keep items fresh. Keep fresh produce out of the direct sunlight during transport.
- **Handle and store produce properly:** Once home, transfer items from your bags or cooler into appropriate containers—such as breathable food-grade containers, jars, or countertop baskets. Separate fruits and vegetables, as some fruits like

bananas and avocados release ethylene gas during ripening, which can affect the ripening of other fruits and vegetables stored nearby (Saltveit, 1999). To extend the shelf-life of all your produce, separate produce that produces ethylene gas from those that are ethylene-sensitive (US Foods, n.d.).

- **Wash and prepare produce just before eating:** Washing and cutting fruits and vegetables too early can lead to faster spoilage. Use a designated cutting board for fresh produce to prevent cross-contamination of harmful pathogens from raw meat or poultry.
- **Know your storage needs:** Different fruits and vegetables have different requirements. Some do best in the refrigerator, while others—like tomatoes, avocados, bananas, citrus, and onions—can be stored at room temperature (UC Davis, 2012). Avoid placing produce near heat or light sources. Properly stored food items retain their flavor, color, and nutrient value for longer periods of time.
- **Plan for consumption and preservation:** Fresh foods are often at peak ripeness and may have shorter shelf lives. Make a plan to use your purchases throughout the week to reduce waste and maximize value. If you've bought in bulk, consider long-term preservation methods like home canning, dehydrating, or freezing. Your local Extension office may offer classes on these preservation techniques.

Food Safety Recommendations for Shoppers

Farmers' markets offer fresh, local goods, but practicing food safety is essential to protect yourself and others. Be aware of symptoms of foodborne illness, which can result from consuming raw or improperly handled foods (CDC, 2025). Follow these best practices to keep your food safe.

At the market and on the way home:

- **Keep foods cold and plan your timing:** Use insulated bags or coolers with ice packs to keep perishable items like meat, eggs, and dairy products cold. Avoid leaving these items in the temperature danger zone (40°F to 140°F) for more than 2 hours, as pathogens can grow rapidly (USDA FSIS 2020). Buy perishable items last and make the market your final stop before heading home.
- **Prevent cross-contamination:** Keep raw meat, poultry, or seafood separate from other foods, especially ready-to-eat food items. Use separate containers or bags for animal products, fresh produce, and other goods to avoid contamination.
- **Be cautious with unpasteurized products:** Some vendors may sell raw milk or unpasteurized juices. These can pose foodborne illness risks, especially for vulnerable groups like young children, older adults,

pregnant women, and those with weakened immune systems.

- **Ask vendors about safety and handling:** Don't hesitate to ask how products should be stored, transported, or prepared. Vendors can offer helpful guidance to ensure safe consumption.

At home:

- **Clean properly:** Wash your reusable grocery bags and coolers after each use. Cloth bags should be cleaned with detergent and thoroughly dried. Plastic-lined insulated bags and coolers should be washed with soap and water, then air-dried. Dump out any remaining ice or water before rinsing and sanitizing cooler surfaces. Always wash hands with soap and water before and after handling food. Wash all produce under running water before eating—even items with skins or rinds that won't be consumed, as bacteria can transfer during cutting. You do not need to use soap or produce cleaners to clean produce.
- **Separate to prevent cross-contamination:** Store raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs separately from other foods in the refrigerator. Use separate cutting boards, plates, and utensils when preparing raw animal products and fresh produce or ready-to-eat items.
- **Cook to safe temperatures:** Use a food thermometer to ensure meats, poultry, seafood, and eggs reach safe internal temperatures, as color and textures are not reliable indicators (USDA FSIS 2025):
 - Beef, pork, fish, shellfish, ham, veal, lamb: 145°F
 - Ground meats, eggs: 160°F
 - Poultry, leftovers, casseroles: 165°F
- **When using a microwave,** cover food, stir, and rotate for even cooking.
- **Chill and store safely:** Use an appliance thermometer to ensure your refrigerator stays at 40°F or below, and your freezer at 0°F or below. Refrigerate or freeze perishable foods within 2 hours of purchase—or within 1 hour if the outside temperature is above 90°F.

Resources

Fresh Access Bucks. "Fresh Access Bucks – Get Free Fruits and Vegetables" (<https://freshaccessbucks.com/>)

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS). "Community farmers markets" (<https://www.fdacs.gov/Consumer-Resources/Buy-Fresh-From-Florida/Community-Farmers-Markets>)

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS). "Crops in season" (<https://www.fdacs.gov/Consumer-Resources/Buy-Fresh-From-Florida/Crops-in-Season>)

US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). "Raw Produce – Selecting and Serving it Safely" (<https://www.fda.gov/media/77178/download>)

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). "Local Food Directories: National Farmers Market Directory" (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets>)

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). "Local Food Research & Development" (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional>)

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2025. "Food Poisoning Symptoms" (<https://www.cdc.gov/food-safety/signs-symptoms/index.html>)

Farmers Market Coalition (FMC). 2025. "About farmers markets" (<https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/education/qa/>)

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). 2020. "How temperatures affect food" (<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/how-temperatures-affect-food>)

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University of California at Davis (UC Davis), Postharvest Technology. 2012. "Storing fresh fruits and vegetables for better taste" (<https://postharvest.ucdavis.edu/sites/g/files/dgvnks12711/files/inline-files/230110.pdf>)

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