

## Are supermarkets cheaper than farmers' markets?

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We love almost all aspects of farming. There is one challenge we are never quite sure how to deal with. Most of you have probably confronted this issue as well at some point—farmers' market customers who complain about the price of local food.

The overwhelming majority of our customers are extremely loyal, supportive, and excited about the opportunity to purchase farm-fresh produce. They make farming joyful, and their positive comments far out-shadow the few skeptics. We frequently hear encouraging remarks such as, "what a bargain"! Yet each season there are a handful of customers who feel our prices are too expensive when compared with the supermarket. We have even had the same gentleman return two years in a row around the start of tomato season to try to pick a fight about the price of our just-off-the-vine, juicy, ripe tomatoes. "I can go to Wal-mart and get these for a lot less", he tells us. Does he know the tomatoes in the grocery store were picked green?

We have tried several different responses to complaints. These include explaining that we must charge a price that enables us to make a living, asking how much our prices vary from what they pay in the grocery store, or gently suggesting they grow a home garden. Most of the time, however, we just bite our lips.

A few weeks ago a regular customer to the farmers' market came by our stand to see the size of our basil bunches and to ask how much we charge. We held up our lush, half pound bunches and told her they are \$2.00. She raised her eyebrows in disbelief and exclaimed, "\$2.00 for something that grows like a weed!", and then stormed off. She probably does not realize how hurtful she is being. Surely she has never toiled out in the Oklahoma heat during July's 100 F + weather, and does not know what a struggle it can be to keep the grasshoppers and other pests from demolishing those enticing green leaves.

Listening to criticism about local food prices bothers us on more than just a personal level. We have chosen farming as our profession in order to give our community an alternative to the often environmentally and socially unjust food available in grocery stores. When someone grumbles about prices, it hurts more than our feelings. It hits right at the soul of why we do what we do.

We began to wonder, are our prices *really* that much more expensive? They do not seem outrageous to us. We decided to put that question to the test.

We selected three area supermarkets with which to compare our farmers' market prices: an organic/health food chain, Wild Oats, as we grow organically (though not certified); the most widespread grocery store in town, Albertsons, as it has eleven locations throughout the city; and Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market with their reputation of low prices. We visited all three stores once in May and once in July of 2005. We went to each store on the same

afternoon, as we realize produce prices fluctuate from day to day. With each visit, we made a list of the items on our farmers' market table that week and noted the grocery store's price.

We started our project in early May with the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market. The first item on our list was romaine lettuce. At the lettuce section of the produce aisle we saw that they were charging \$1.38 a head while we were charging \$2.50 (which includes sales tax). On the surface, Wal-Mart seemed cheaper, but those were tiny lettuce heads. We took the lettuce over to the scale, and were shocked to find it barely weighed one pound. Our romaine weighed three pounds, and was greener, had fewer culled outer leaves, and had none of that tale-tell sign of old produce-wilt. Thus, we refined our research by noting both the price and the weight of each item. When adjusted to a price per pound basis, Wal-Mart's lettuce would have cost \$4.49 if it weighed as much as ours did.

Of course, there are the specialty items not grown commercially and only found at our market stand that we could not compare, such as mizuna or baby lima beans. Not every store had the same selection. Overall, Wal-Mart had fewer items than Albertsons or Wild Oats. We compiled the weight and price of 22 spring items and 20 summer crops that we and the grocery stores offered in common. From this data we created a table that calculated the price per pound.

Our farmers' market is located in Tulsa, OK, and as an average American city in the middle of the country, it seems like a suitable reference point. All of our prices include sales tax, therefore sales tax was figured into the table's metric. However, we are still not dealing with a level playing field with Wal-Mart and Albertsons produce as it is not, for the most part, organic. And needless to say, the difference in quality and freshness of local produce is priceless, as evidenced by the photo of the collard greens we could not help ourselves from buying from Wal-Mart.

Analyzing the data on a price per pound basis yielded interesting results. While much of what people buy in the grocery store has a cheaper price tag than what they purchase at our market stand, in nearly every case the grocery store food weighed significantly less. This gives meaning to the expression, "you get what you pay for". Additionally, not everything has a cheaper price tag in the grocery store, such as basil and heirloom tomatoes which are both dramatically higher.

For the spring crops, the cheapest option was our own produce. Eleven of the 22 items were cheaper at our stand. Two were most expensive at our stand—broccoli and cauliflower. Albertsons was second with 5 items being cheapest at their store. Wal-Mart and Wild Oats were tied for third with 3 items being cheapest at each of their stores. When we were most expensive, it was never by more than \$1. On the other hand, each grocery store charged over \$3 more for butterhead than we did.

For the summer crops, Wal-Mart lived up to its reputation with 7 of the 20 items being cheapest there. But we tied with them for first place with 7 of our items also being cheapest. Albertsons was third with 5 and Wild Oats came in last with one item being the cheapest there. Again, two of our items were most expensive, watermelon and okra and neither was more than \$0.75 higher. The best buy was by far the basil, since it can only be purchased in packages of less than an ounce in the grocery stores. The yellow peppers were more than twice as expensive in the grocery store.

The results reveal that perceptions rather than facts influence the false assumptions that grocery store food is always cheapest. It turns out that even that gentleman who thinks he can get vine-ripened tomatoes for less at Wal-Mart was wrong. But the point of this article is not to convince the public that local food is cheap too. Your local farmer is NOT the place to look for a bargain. If anything, we should be getting a premium for providing the invaluable serve of

food truly picked fresh. When farmers' market prices are too cheap, the farmer is in essence subsidizing his/her customer's grocery bill, making their food artificially discounted.

Moreover, the grocery store prices do not include the hidden costs of that food. Conventional produce in particular is subsidized by university and industry research, health care and clean up costs of pesticide pollution, and substandard wages for farm laborers. Much of the organic produce comes from a similar agribusiness model that takes advantage of low wages and minimal regulatory oversight in developing countries.

Education is a major part of what we do. Since conducting this research we have started sharing the surprising finds with those few customers who protest our prices. We have also begun disseminating a local foods factsheet.

This article helps establish that grocery store food is not as cheap as some customers believe it to be. Nor is local simply for the wealthy-it is competitively priced since our research showed grocery stores' low posted prices tend to hide lower weight and quality.

The reasons for buying locally-produced food are compelling. These include the benefits of eating fresher, tastier, and more nutritionally intact food, reducing air pollution and fossil fuel consumption through decreased transportation miles, greater variety selection, preserving farmland and open space, and keeping money within the local economy. Grocery store food from half-way around the world can never compete with the benefits of eating food from your neighborhood.