



Farmers Markets Offer Fresh, Local Pick of the Crop!



There's nothing like the taste of a fresh tomato or a juicy peach to bring out the flavor of summer. Starting in May, Fairfax County's 10 farmers markets come to life with a feast for the senses ranging from colorful fruits and vegetables to fragrant flowers and baked goods to locally sourced eggs, dairy and meat.

"The advantage to shopping at Park Authority Farmers Markets is that everything is grown within a 125-mile radius of Fairfax County and picked at the peak of freshness," said Patrick McNamara, a naturalist and vegetable gardening instructor at Frying Pan Farm Park. "Generally, the richer the color of produce, the deeper the flavor."

When it comes to flavor, McNamara says timing can make big difference, too. Early harvests of vegetables like lettuce, broccoli and Brussels sprouts tend to have a more delicate flavor, while those harvested later in the season usually have bolder tastes.

"Early potatoes are smaller and have a different flavor than larger, later varieties," he said. "Heirloom tomato varieties have fuller flavors than commercial hybrids, and with squash, the smaller the vegetable, the milder the flavor. Larger squash has stronger, earthier flavors."



McNamara says your senses are a good way to select melons, too. Cantaloupes should be fragrant, and the stem area should give way under gentle pressure. They will continue to ripen off the vine. By contrast, watermelons stop ripening once harvested, so you should look for watermelons that have a yellow, flat spot on the underside – an indication that they spent more time on the vine for ripening.

Perhaps the best way to learn your way around the Farmers Markets is to talk to the growers themselves. They can provide information that grocery stores cannot because they cultivated the crops themselves and harvested them for your table.

"Growing plants and food for others is their passion project and they love it," McNamara said. "The more you get to know them, the more they will reveal you, and by developing that relationship, you'll feel more confident that the fresh fruits and vegetables you select will suit your family's tastes."

That sense of community can give you the assurance that produce you purchase at Park Authority Farmers Markets is fresh, locally-grown and consistently great.

To find a Park Authority Farmers market near you, see the ad on page 79 in the Gardening section.

