



veg box schemes



what are they?

They're a way of getting local farm produce delivered to your home or pick-up point - weekly or sometimes fortnightly. Boxes can also contain fruit, herbs, eggs, dairy produce, meat, honey or anything else you stipulate that you'd like from your local scheme, if available. And it may come in a bag by the way, as well as a box.

History: in the 1980s in Devon, organic growers Tim and Jane Deane, found that their veg travelled 50 miles to the regional co-op, then 200 miles to a supermarket depot, then back to a supermarket 10 miles away, to be sold at 4 times the price that they'd sold them to the regional co-op. They decided to have a go at selling boxes of seasonal, fresh fruit and veg directly to local customers, to reduce food miles and to keep more of the retail price. It worked, and after 2 years, they had 200 local customers. They appeared on TV in 1991, after which the idea caught on. Now there are around 600 veg box schemes in the UK. However, although there are plenty of small, local producers, the market has come to be dominated by large producers like Abel & Cole, with even bigger corporate players set to join the game. As you'd expect, we advise you to avoid these big players, who need to either own vast areas of land, or to extract money from small farmers to pay their shareholders.



Regather co-op in Sheffield deliver their veg boxes by tricycle.

what are the benefits?

From an environmental perspective, food needs to be transported less; box schemes are mostly organic, so fewer pesticides are used; and there's less waste, as vegetables don't need to be perfectly shaped, as they do for supermarkets. Fresh, seasonal food is tastier and better for you. Fruit and veg start to lose flavour and nutritional value from the moment they're picked. Produce is harvested in the previous week, not 6 weeks, like most supermarket fruit and veg.

Seasonal produce can mean a reduced range at some times of year. Some can be preserved, but it's good, in terms of health and environment, to eat as much food that's local and in season as possible. It connects us to nature's cycles, and encourages us to experiment with recipes that we might not try if we just rely on imported food. The trick is to find recipes for ingredients, rather than searching for food for a particular recipe. A lot of schemes include recipe ideas for different times of the year.

Some schemes add some imported food when local food is scarce (e.g. in the 'hungry gap' in May). They tend to be from Europe though, rather than air-freighted from further afield.

Box schemes help support small farmers and decentralise our food supply - i.e. to take it out of the hands of just a few corporate suppliers (who extract profits from farmers to pay for large advertising budgets, head offices, land purchases, higher food miles, executive salaries and shareholder payments). The big players like Abel & Cole are, of course, doing the exact opposite. Their priority is and has to be making money, not local food. Corporate supermarkets are joining the field too.



Compare veg boxes with supermarket shopping in terms of local, seasonal food, diverting money from corporates to small producers, reducing pesticide use, packaging and food miles, freshness, healthiness and sustainability.



what can I do?

Finding a scheme: there are sites with listings of local veg box schemes (see resources) or search for veg box and the name of your town. Don't give the big boys your money if you're interested in supporting local growers and reducing food miles. Not all veg boxes are organic, so if you want to reduce pesticide use too, check when you sign up.

Joining a scheme: think about the questions you need to ask. Are you just after fruit and veg? Can you cancel your order when you go on holiday? Can you opt out of any specific foods? Do you have somewhere to leave your delivery, or is there a local pick-up point?

Organise your delivery. If you're out on delivery day, there needs to be a dry, shady place to leave your box, or usually you can arrange for it to be delivered to a local drop-off point, where you can collect it in the evening. There are different sized boxes, depending on the size of your household, or you could even share a box with a neighbour, and you can have weekly or fortnightly deliveries. Don't be scared to complain if some of the contents of your box is poor quality - your scheme will want to know, so they can put it right.

Using a scheme: if there's a type of food that no-one in your household will eat, you can ask them to leave it out of your box. But veg boxes are not like farmers' markets, in that you just get a selection of local food that's in season. So it's not good for growers to have customers that are too fussy. Fussy eating, as pointed out by one organic grower, is a 'first world problem'. She also, hilariously, advocated lying to your children if necessary - 'you had this before, and you loved it'. She says it works. Actually, this isn't a trivial problem, because if your kids are really fussy eaters, they might be missing out on essential nutrients and vitamins. Tailoring boxes for specific customers is a logistical problem for growers, so maybe use the recipes provided, change your habits a bit, but also question whether your tastes have been manipulated by the modern food industry, which has made us more tolerant of a diet heavy in meat, sugar and fats, to the detriment of our health and the environment. Stick with it a bit to see if you can rehabilitate your taste buds. But, if none of that works, most schemes will allow you to opt out of 2 specific food items. Even if you're not a fussy eater, when a particular fruit

or veg is in season, you might get a lot of it for a few weeks. Recipe sites then come in handy - you can serve the same veg in different ways, for variety. Plan your weekly menu when you get your box, and use the things that don't last as long first, so you don't have to throw food away.

Make sure you have a composting system to take the peelings, carrot tops, wilted leaves etc.

Setting up a scheme: for farmers & smallholders - a hectare typically provides for around 60 boxes, but you won't be producing one or two crops - more like 50 is the norm. At some times of year, you could use polytunnels, get food in from elsewhere, or close down for a couple of months. Do your sums and see if the amount of land you have can cover your costs. You'll be spending time and fuel on deliveries, but if you can build a customer base, you'll have a guaranteed market without price squeezes, cancelled contracts and food waste you get with supermarkets. However, many growers are not up for the marketing side of things, so produce food for an existing scheme, or form a co-operative with other local growers. Sometimes, groups of local people set up schemes, and collect produce from local growers.

resources

- lowimpact.org/veg-box-schemes for more info, links, books, including:
- Jones & Wilmot, *the Boxing Clever Cookbook*
- Philip Conford, *the Development of the Organic Network*
- Mark Hix, *British Seasonal Food*
- <http://www.findlocalproduce.co.uk/Veg-Box-Schemes> - listing of UK box schemes
- foodboxfinder.co.uk - another listing site
- bigbarn.co.uk - find local food in the UK



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