

Where does your food come from?

by: Heather Bryant, Extension Educator for Agricultural Resources

Recently some colleagues and I were invited to put together a presentation for a local school. The teacher made the comment that she wants to talk to her class about how people ate before Walmart. It was an off hand remark, but it highlights an important issue.

Kids are very grocery store savvy. By the time they are in their early teens they can wheel the cart around like a pro and find nearly every item on your list. But do they know what part of the pig provides ham, what foods can be produced here and what foods have to be shipped in, what a togie is and if it's edible, and can they look at a garden and point to the beet? Maybe, maybe not. Do you know? Does it matter?

Of course it matters. And of course my views are shaped in part by my occupation. We vote for our food system with our dollars. If our children don't know where their food comes from, they can't grow up to effectively vote for the system they want to have.

So what can you do to educate your children?

Turn meal times into game time. Try to stump your kids with a food question like the ones above and challenge them to stump you. If someone comes up with a question no one in the family can answer, go on a mission. Surf the net, go to the library, or ask at grocery store or farmers market. If you really get stumped, send the question to me and I'll make it a subject for this column.

Take your kids on a farm tour or pick your own excursion. The following website is hosted by the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture, Markets and Food and allows you to search for agriculture related attractions in your area. <http://www.visitnh.gov/what-to-do/key-attractions/>

Encourage your kids to ask grandparents or older people in their lives what changes they've seen in food over their lives so far, and whether or not they remember growing or raising any their own food. Try to find someone who grew up in a different part of the world, and ask them if growing seasons are different or if they raise the same livestock.

Check out the following list of online agriculture related educational information, games and activities for kids of all ages. <http://www.kidsolr.com/science/page2a.html>

If your kids are older teens, challenge them in another way. For instance they could prepare a meal with only foods you could get in the grocery store 50 years ago, or a meal with no out of season ingredients. Challenge them to discover how fossil fuels are used in agriculture or what foods a person with a gluten allergy can eat. In return let them challenge you; in the process you might get them to reveal what kinds of intellectual or political interests they are beginning to develop.

Our food system is changing. Each generation gets to add to those changes. My generation was interested in convenience; we flexed our first cooking muscles with a microwave and the instructions on a box. We also started out with fewer choices; when the growing season was over we ate frozen and canned vegetables. Later as more fresh produce became available in the stores year round, we somehow missed the fact that these specimens looked beautiful and tasted bland. Many of us are questioning some of those food system votes we cast, and where they led us. We are trying to backtrack and re-educate ourselves. So take the kids along. By educating children on the bigger picture of where food comes from and what choices are available to them, we help ensure that the changes they help usher in will be the ones that they will be happy to see.

Look for next week's column by County Forester David Falkenham.

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