

# Cutting Carbon From Your Family's Diet

By Gemma Alexander

## Simple ways your family can eat more sustainably

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In a year when we can't celebrate Earth Day with public marches and celebrations, we can hold a rally at home by building more climate-friendly habits that we can sustain for the long term. Cutting carbon emissions from our diet is one of the most promising ways to do that. Eating more sustainably not only helps the planet, it also [makes us healthier](#) and can actually save us money. Here is how your family can adopt a lower-carbon diet.

### 1. Waste less.

Environmental responsibility is often perceived as requiring sacrifice, but one of the most effective ways to cut carbon from your diet doesn't require you to give up anything. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, about one-third of the world's annual food production is lost or wasted every year. That wasted food accounts for 8 percent of human global greenhouse gas emissions.

Some of that loss happens along the supply chain, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that Americans waste about [400 pounds of food](#) per person each year, to the tune of \$218 billion. That much waste would be unthinkable in almost any other aspect of our lives.

Careful meal [planning](#), shopping with a list and "[cooking scrappy](#)" are among the [tricks you can use](#) to dramatically reduce the amount of food your family tosses out each year.

### 2. Minimize meat.

According to a [study](#) in the journal Science, a vegan diet is the single most effective way for individuals to minimize their environmental impact. Eating a vegetarian or vegan diet does require planning to ensure a [sufficient amount of protein](#) is consumed, but the standard American diet is actually *too* rich in protein. Nutritionally and environmentally speaking, most meat eaters [need to cut down](#). But switching to a vegan diet is a significant lifestyle change that many people are not willing or even able to make.

But the good news is you don't have to take an all-or-nothing approach to do your part: You don't have to be vegan to eat less meat than you do now. If your family usually has meat with every meal, try eating [one vegetarian meal](#) per day, or give [Meatless Monday](#) a go. Try shifting the balance on your plate; instead of a piece of meat with a side salad, try a dinner salad with a bit of meat. Even changing [which meats you eat](#) can make an environmental difference — beef produces more greenhouse gases than pork, which produces more than chicken.

### 3. Buy organic.

Many people [buy organic food](#) to avoid exposure to and pollution from pesticides. And [there is controversy](#) over whether switching to organic farming would reduce climate change or actually increase net greenhouse gas emissions. But even if organic farming isn't the magic bullet many people hope for, it does [promote](#)

[healthy soil](#), increasing the soil's capacity to sequester carbon dioxide as a huge carbon sink. When it's available and if you can afford it, buy organic.

## 5 Reasons to Join a CSA

It stands to reason that foods that haven't been transported long distances or passed through a factory before reaching our tables will not only be fresher, but will also have fewer environmental impacts. That's true, yet life-cycle analyses have shown that [processing and transportation](#) contribute relatively small proportions of the greenhouse gas emissions attributed to foods. However, even if visiting a farmers market or subscribing to a CSA (an acronym for community supported agriculture) doesn't directly change your climate impact, there are still some very good reasons to buy local.

### 1. CSAs reduce loss.

The direct climate benefit of buying food directly from the producer is small, but it does exist, and it is somewhat amplified by an indirect benefit. Buying local cuts out the distribution step — shipping and retail — from your food's life cycle, and with it, the wastage that would have occurred before the food reached you, the consumer.

### 2. CSAs strengthen community ties.

Know your farmer, know your food. When you buy directly, you get to know your farmer, building a relationship with the people who feed you. You know more about your food: what's in season where you live, what methods were used to grow it and how different varieties of the same type of produce taste. You become a more informed diner and tend to make healthier food choices.

### 3. CSAs and their customers support our local economy.

Those community ties you build with your farmer are not just about good feelings. Money spent on CSAs or at a farmers market stays in the community. Nearly all direct-market farmers buy their supplies locally, compared with [45 percent of wholesale farmers](#). They also spend their profits locally, because they live here, too.

### 4. CSAs increase food security.

Industrial-scale farming requires huge produce monocultures — often of varieties that hold up well for shipping but don't taste as good. Local farms can branch out, planting many varieties of the same produce, including heirloom varieties that may taste better. This biodiversity offers more than just different flavor profiles — varieties of a crop also have different degrees of resistance to diseases. One type of corn might be wiped out by a new disease, but if there are dozens of corn varieties in cultivation, some of them might survive.

Local food is a form of disaster proofing, too. The spread of the coronavirus pandemic has raised the specter of breakdowns in the food distribution network through travel restrictions or the shutdown of large warehouses. If that happens, we'll be grateful for a weekly delivery of a box of food picked by a handful of workers at a local farm. Also, local disasters have less of an impact when food systems are not centralized. For example, the United States depends on Washington for [90 percent](#) of its raspberries — great for us, but bad for everybody if we have a poor harvest.

### 5. CSAs are a bushel of fun!

It's like Christmas every week to receive a box brimming with locally grown and harvested vegetables, fruits, herbs and even flowers. Bonus: Most participating farms have a field-trip day, when you and the fam can put on your grungies and take a tour of exactly where those carrots came from. You can even help out — bail some hay, pick some veggies, water some flowers. It's the full farm experience with a bumper crop of learning opportunities for you and your kids. Check out our list of [fabulous CSAs](#) in the Seattle area.

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