

Our Community Table

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Perhaps this Thanksgiving you will sit down to a feast with a plump, farm fresh, pasture-raised turkey from the Salt Pond Community as the centerpiece. Or, perhaps the sweet potatoes and collard greens on your table were grown in the Pine Grove or Antioch Communities. Maybe the honey you drizzle over those biscuits was harvested from beehives in Rembert. Sounds good, doesn't it? But is it so good because it is local, or is it so good because I *know* it is local? The answer is a little of both.

Local food can be harvested closer to the time it makes it to your kitchen, forgoing any of the chemicals and processes used to lengthen shelf life or induce ripeness. The shorter the distance from farm to fork means a healthier product, as nutritional values decline in post-harvest transport and storage. So, of course, it tastes better.

But it also tastes better because buying local makes my conscience happy. By buying local, I contribute to a healthier local economy and encourage a stable local food supply, decreasing our reliance on far-off places to provide for our community. In the meantime I also reduce energy consumption and help preserve local farmland. Kershaw County has many scenic routes through farmland such as Hwy 261 through Boykin, or Hwy 521 towards Sumter, or Old Georgetown Road in Cassatt. Maybe it is just the ol' country girl in me, but I appreciate the sight of a newly baled hayfield, or a plot of land freshly tilled and planted in rows.

According to the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, the number of farms in the state is declining. As one of the fastest growing states in the nation according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, land in South Carolina is being consumed by urban growth at a much higher rate than would be predicted from population growth figures alone. The USDA has reported that South Carolina is the ninth-ranked state in terms of total land area developed annually. This land is – or was – family land since 90% of the state's farms are owned by individuals, families, or family corporations.

In a 2002 census, the S.C. Agricultural Statistic Service found 479 farms in Kershaw County. But these farms aren't just for looks. The cash receipts from these Kershaw County farms in 2003 from crops and livestock totaled \$66,649,000.00. In addition, a Clemson University report shows that Kershaw County timber sales in 2001 equaled \$18,412,224.00.

Commercial forests are an invaluable resource for the state. Forests provide watershed protection, wildlife habitat, forests products, beauty, recreation, and serve to improve air quality. Nearly 1 in 3 SC residents fishes in SC waters, roughly 1/10th of the state population hunts, and another large portion of the state's population engages in bird watching, hiking or backpacking, and canoeing.

The food, fiber, and forestry industry is one of the most important components of the SC economy as the industry provides approximately 460,000 full and part-time jobs in SC and \$15.1 billion in income (which is over 17% of the state's total income), according to a study prepared by Mark S. Henry, Professor, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, Clemson University. Although the number of farms is declining, the productivity of the remaining farms is increasing due in great part to technological advances and more efficient methods of production.

With the successful opening of the Kershaw County Farmers Market this year, people have the opportunity to buy local during the growing season. Both the consumer and the small farmer benefit from this market; by supporting small family farms consumers help to preserve our beautiful landscape, provide additional income for these families, and sustain a local economy and food supply.

The market will only be open for a few more weeks as the harvest season ends for much of our local produce. The market's last day this year will be December 10. It will re-open next spring, and we anticipate greater vendor participation as more local farmers/producers plan their plantings and crops especially for the market.

The world has changed a lot since the days described by my grandfather. How will the world look to my grandchildren? Much different, I suppose, but I hope that we will have preserved for their experience the values and heritage that identify this community. As we bring our families together for Thanksgiving, I would like to think we are also bringing our community together in the items we put on our table.

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