



“Let’s Talk About Food”

Community Perspectives on Local Food in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven

RESILIENT & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH GROUP |
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SUMMARY

The "Let's Talk About Food" survey, conducted with over 700 households in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions, aimed to explore residents' thoughts on locally produced food, their participation in urban agriculture initiatives, and their shopping habits for local foods.

Key findings reveal residents highly value the freshness, quality, and community benefits of local food but face barriers such as cost, limited availability, and lack of accessibility. There is substantial dissatisfaction with the availability of farmers markets and community gardening spaces in the region.

This report proposes recommendations to improve the availability, affordability, and accessibility of local food through targeted initiatives that strengthen community engagement and the local food economy.

THE LET'S TALK ABOUT FOOD SURVEY

Local food systems are crucial for promoting sustainability in terms of food production, enhancing food security, and fostering economic resilience in Illawarra and Shoalhaven. UOW researchers from the Resilient and Sustainable Food Systems Research group has documented the state of local food systems in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven.

- [A situational analysis of commercial and social enterprises highlights a network](#) of 48 small-scale growers focused on local food distribution. Operating primarily on privately owned land, these enterprises rely on limited labour, often supplemented by volunteers, and diversify income through direct sales, off-farm sources, and grants.
- [A study into community gardens identified](#) 25 community gardens, mainly in Wollongong and Shellharbour. These gardens, mostly on council-owned land, depend on volunteer labour to grow and distribute a variety of produce. While they provide numerous benefits such as fresh food access, social connections, and skill development, they also face challenges like volunteer burnout, limited access to land, and lack of grants.

This report builds on this evidence by presenting an analysis of the "Let's Talk About Food" survey, which engaged over 700 households in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions to explore various aspects of local food systems. In collaboration with Healthy Cities Illawarra and Food Fairness Illawarra, UOW researchers wanted to understand residents' attitudes towards local produce, the benefits and challenges of buying local, participation in urban agriculture, and shopping habits for local foods. These insights aim to help their advocacy effort towards improving local food systems and strengthening community engagement.

Results of the “Let’s Talk About Food” Survey

ATTITUDES AND PREFERENCES FOR LOCAL PRODUCE

In the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions, residents told us they place significant value on local food production. Many respondents expressed the place a high degree of importance on supporting local food producers, and cited benefits like food freshness, quality, and community support.

- **The freshness and quality** of local produce are highly valued and thought to be nutritious with residents appreciating the longevity and freshness compared to supermarket alternatives.
- **Supporting local food producers** is seen as vital for sustaining the local economy, ensuring that expenditures on food benefit local farmers and their families directly.
- **Environmental and ethical considerations** also play a role, as buying local is thought to reduce the transportation impacts and support more sustainable farming practices.
- **Cultural and community connections** fostered through market events and local food initiatives are cherished for bringing residents together, enhancing social ties and communal engagement.





PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND BARRIERS OF BUYING LOCAL

Local food is valued by local residents for offering unique foods, convenient delivery options, trusted quality, and a positive impact on healthy eating habits.

Unique & Specialty Items

• *I love buying local food ... it tends to be more speciality food that is a treat (pickles, jams, wine, etc.)."*

Convenience for Certain Shoppers

• *"My household buys a weekly fruit/vegetable box from Avondale Organics, which is excellent value for money. I also find it convenient to have the groceries delivered."*

Trust & Transparency

• *"I like to know where the food is coming from and I live in an area where the mountains meet the sea. Lots of fresh air, rain and sunshine, no pollution."*

Improves healthy eating

• *"I passionately support box divvy. We could not eat as healthily as we do without box divvy. Fair pricing and huge variety of fresh produce."*

The main barriers to supporting local food producers are **cost, accessibility, and availability**. Many respondents find local food expensive compared to supermarket options, making it unaffordable for those on tight budgets. Accessibility is another key issue, with local food often available only at limited times (e.g., farmers markets on weekdays) or locations requiring travel. Additionally, the lack of information on where to find local products, including poor labelling is a challenge. This force people to prioritise convenience and affordability even if they want to support local producers.

Perceived High Costs

• *"I love to support local but i wish it was easier to access and not so expensive. They are wonderful products but can't be produced for anywhere near the selling price in supermarkets"*

Limited Access and Options

• *"I would absolutely love to buy local produce but with my work hours find it impossible to access as it is mostly only available at farmer's markets"*

Limited Variety

• *"It's really hard to support suppliers locally that have a wide variety"*

Lack of Information and Visibility

• *"I don't know how to find locally produced food. I do believe in the importance of local food production.."*

WHERE ARE PEOPLE SOURCING LOCAL FOODS?

Urban agriculture is an important part of local food systems, helping people grow and access fresh produce close to home. Our survey found that

- Nearly a third (31%) of households said they grow their own food, 5% forage or hunt for food, and 4% participate in crop swaps.
- Only 10% of households get food from community gardens or other people's gardens. Most respondents (63%) said didn't think there were enough community gardening spaces.



People told us they are buying local food in many places, including



- Opportunities to improve the sale of local foods would be welcomed, as most respondents (63%) did not agree there was enough farmers markets in their region.

ACT NOW

Interested in learning how to garden and share the load as part of a community? Discover more about [joining or starting a community garden](#), and [find your local community garden](#).

WHERE NEXT?

The "Let's Talk About Food" survey findings led directly to the creation of **the Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce**—a collaborative network of health experts and community advocates dedicated to promoting a healthier, more accessible regional food system. Key initiatives include:

- Advocating for local, state, and/or federal funding to support an updated **Regional Food Strategy** for the Illawarra Shoalhaven to strengthen the local food system.
- **Engaging policymakers and stakeholders** through tailored briefings and presentations, highlighting survey findings and the economic and health benefits of a vibrant local food system.
- Establishing **partnerships with philanthropic organisations and private sector investors** to diversify funding sources, aligning local food projects with broader sustainability and community health goals.

In addition, Food Fairness Illawarra should be supported in continuing their successful local food system initiatives, such as:

- Hosting the annual [Illawarra Edible Garden Trail](#), where over 600 participants explore approximately 40 local gardens and learn sustainable home gardening techniques.
- Regularly updating the [Shopping Local directory](#) to include all local producers and community gardens, ensuring accurate details that facilitate community engagement.
- Enhancing [community knowledge](#) about local food production through educational posts, videos, and a detailed events calendar showcasing local gardening events.
- Promoting active participation in local food initiatives like [crop swaps](#) and garden volunteering through digital platforms and events calendar.