

Budget-friendly ways to get your veggie fix as prices rise

February 20 2019, by Sylvain Charlebois



Vegetable prices are on the rise. How can Canadians cope? Credit: Scott Warman/Unsplash

[The Food Price Report 2019](#), released by Dalhousie University and the University of Guelph in December, suggested vegetable prices will go up by as much as six per cent this year. That's significant because, unlike meat or fish, fewer alternatives exist when it comes to replacing vegetables.

Coming on the report's heels was the new Canada's Food Guide, which recommended Canadians [consume more plants and less meat](#).

According to the Food Report, El Niño is to blame for rising vegetable prices, since Canada imports a great quantity of veggies from regions prone to drought during El Niño periods, including the western United States and northern Mexico. [And 2019 is an El Niño year](#).

The six per cent increase is in addition to the [4.8 per cent hike in vegetable prices in 2018](#).

Given that we could experience another year of significant price increases, many wonder whether eating [local produce](#) is a better option.

Global supply chains have allowed us to become more efficient and given consumers more choices and a broader selection of affordable food products. But eating local has its advantages, too.

Reducing your carbon footprint

The environmental case for eating local is [almost undisputed](#). You can [significantly reduce your carbon footprint just by increasing your locally grown food consumption](#).

And local food is consistently priced, if generally higher. Price is much less volatile when short-circuit distribution systems are involved. The number of intermediaries is limited compared to global food chains, which are exposed to environmental fluctuations and differing economic conditions, and can all lead to greater cost variations.

Extensive, large-scale networks always give markets what they need at the right time, at the right place, at a decent price and with an acceptable level of quality —until something goes terribly wrong. A single failure

can lead to huge disruptions that affect many people.

A case in point is the [romaine lettuce crisis](#) in November. Fresh lettuce grown in California and Arizona is delivered to Canadians at a decent price. But with the E. coli outbreak in romaine lettuce, not only did people get sick, but the prices of leafy greens in Canada skyrocketed.

The [Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#) prevented romaine lettuce from entering Canada. When that happens, importers must procure similar products elsewhere, likely at higher cost, to meet consumer expectations. Consumers want their leafy greens, even in winter, no matter what.

Eventually, the situation goes back to normal and most have forgotten about the romaine lettuce crisis. That's the nature of market failures. Systems adapt and improve over time.

Local food systems more stable

But many people in the marketplace envy the stability and sustainability of [local food](#) systems. Unlike global supply chain systems, transparency is a non-issue since most producers know each other.

Buying locally grown vegetables can also give some peace of mind to shoppers. You'll likely pay more, but the prices are mostly predictable. Simplicity has its virtues, but it also comes at a cost. Local food is typically more expensive [than the cheapest imported varieties](#) available in the same marketplace.

[Research shows that city dwellers prefer locally grown or manufactured food products.](#) for the simple fact that agriculture is often a distant concept to them. Some Canadians have never been to a farm. Buying local is the one way to feel a real connection with agriculture and farmers.

There's also more wealth in cities than rural communities. So although price is still a consideration for urban dwellers, it's more important to less wealthy consumers in rural areas.

That's where global supply chains come in.

Given that Canadians have access to one of the most affordable food baskets in the world relative to household income, global supply chains appear to be serving them well.

Wintry climate leaves us with few options

And getting our vegetable fix from all over the world isn't such a bad idea. Our nordic climate doesn't give us many options. But global supply chains come with their fair share of risks, which in turn generate price volatility.

At the same time, buying local produce can be critical to our agri-[food](#) economy. In many parts of the country, local vegetable production is a priority, through vertical farms, greenhouses using novel technologies and other initiatives.

Access to more locally grown vegetables, while striking a balance between local and global, will be key.

But rising [vegetable](#) prices are a challenge for many, especially those with limited incomes. That means visiting the freezer aisle may not be a bad idea. It may not taste the same as fresh, but you'll get the same nutritional value from frozen veggies.

Amid all this, there is one piece of good news: The Food Price Report 2019 suggests that the cost of meat and fish products will drop this year by up to three per cent.

That's the first decline in fish and meat [prices](#) in the study's nine-year history.

So meat lovers can do a happy dance around the barbecue next summer. Just don't forget the veggies.

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