SECTION 5

Local and Seasonal Food



Local culture, local food and seasonality

Defining local and seasonal food

Sustainable diets are built on respect of local culture and practice, and value food production and thoughtful sourcing.[3]

Local food – the term local refers to geographical distance, but can also indirectly refer to specific practices in production, for example the number of suppliers and distributors between the producer and the final consumer.[43] Local also reflects traditional knowledge.[43,45-47]

Seasonal food refers to food being purchased and consumed close to the time that it is harvested.[44]

Local and seasonal food purchasing and ECEC services

ECEC services purchase large amounts of food and are therefore an important food procurement setting that can have environmental and local economy impacts at scale.[29] Purchasing some food from local food producers or community food enterprises can not only have human and environmental health benefits, but also support local food economies, making them more sustainable in the long term.[45]

Internationally, ECEC local food purchasing is supported through Farm to ECEC programs that interconnect local food procurement, gardening, and food, nutrition and agriculture education for children attending ECEC settings.[30] There is currently no formal program that supports farm to ECEC programs in Australia.

Services may engage in elements of these approaches. For ECEC services, the local and seasonal food principle relates to menu planning, food procurement and food education. This may include purchasing from local producers, community food hubs or growing some food in their service garden. Seasonal purchasing can support food quality and variety, lower transport costs, and reduce food costs.[29,31] In addition, there is an educational opportunity for children to explore, experience and learn about local and seasonal foods and food cultures through the meals they eat, gardening and cooking experiences, play, stories, incursions, excursions and conversations.[1,31,42] Table 9 outlines types of food sourcing.

TABLE 9: *Types of food sourcing*[29,45]

National Sourcing	Buying "Australian grown" food
Regional sourcing	Sourcing food from within your state
Community/Local sourcing	Purchasing products from local farmers or community hubs*
Growing food in a garden	Further information on growing food onsite for educational purposes, tasting activities or to supplement the menu is available in the Gardens section of this module *See Section 6, page 78*

*When purchasing from local producers, ensure they are a registered food business.

Strategies to support local food systems and local food culture

The following strategies, together with common considerations, challenges and potential solutions, are designed to support local food systems and culture.

Managing the cost of local food purchasing
Some of the strategies presented throughout the SFP module, such as effective menu planning, purchasing in bulk, buying seasonal produce, being mindful of the cuts of meat and adding legumes to meals, could reduce costs and potentially offset some of the additional costs of local food purchasing.

What knowledge and training do ECEC staff need for local food purchasing?

- An understanding of seasonality and how to plan seasonal menus.
- Skills to adapt recipes with seasonality in mind.
- Knowledge of how to identify and connect with local food suppliers.
- Training covering food safety when sourcing from new suppliers, including which foods are lower risk to start with.

When sourcing food from local suppliers or producers, services should consider applicable food safety and environmental health requirements in addition to their responsibilities under the National Quality Framework. Local food procurement may involve obligations relating to supplier approval, food safety, food handling and traceability that sit outside ECEC-specific regulatory requirements.

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK	NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4	QA1, QA2, QA3, QA6

Strategies to support local food systems and local food culture

The following strategies, together with common considerations, challenges and potential solutions, are designed to support local food systems and culture.

Refer overpage for details on challenges/considerations and potential solutions.

Menu planning

When planning yearly menu cycles, adjust meals to incorporate seasonal produce or modify existing recipes to include seasonal ingredients.

Use recipes/plan menus that reflect and respect local cultural traditions.

Food procurement

Purchase a proportion of food with locality in mind.
National sourcing: As a minimum, focus on Australian products.
Regional sourcing: If available in your supplier or retailer, focus on products from state-based or regional farmers.
Community/Local Sourcing: Connect with local manufacturers, farmers, markets or community food hubs. For example, purchase apples from the local apple grower.

Onsite growing of small amounts of produce for learning, tasting, and supplementing menus, or partnerships with existing community gardens.

A local food procurement plan can guide service staff, and local procurement goals can ensure that local sourcing becomes a routine rather than relying on individual enthusiasm.

Start small, (e.g. focus on one product line e.g. milk, a popular fruit or vegetable, or another staple like bread or pasta) and grow from there.

Food education

Garden-based food education experiences help children learn where food comes from.

See Food Education, Section 3, page 70

Books and learning experiences can focus on teaching children where food comes from, to facilitate discussions around food from their local area.

Children can learn about local food cultures through garden-based food education, books and stories. The vignette: A day in the Wilds, outlines some strategies and reflections for connecting to culture through the garden.

See Vignette, page 80 of this module

Excursions or incursions, or learning about a local farm, can connect children with place.

See Food Education, Section 3, page 99

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK
Outcome 2, Outcome 3, Outcome 4

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD
QA1, QA6

When implementing these strategies services should ensure they continue to meet the relevant food safety, food allergy and regulatory requirements.

See Section 5, page 74

TABLE 10: *Strategies to support local food systems and local food culture*[29,31,43-45,47,48-51]

Strategies	Challenges/considerations	Potential solutions
Menu planning		
When planning yearly menu cycles, adjust meals to incorporate seasonal produce or modify existing recipes to include seasonal ingredients.	Limited skills to adjust recipes.	*See Menu and Meal Quality, Section 5, page 50*
	Time needed for recipe adjustment and procurement and the costs of staff time.	*See Menu and Meal Quality, Section 5, page 52*
Use recipes/plan menus that reflect and respect local cultural traditions	Limited knowledge/skills/confidence due to staff being unfamiliar with traditional ingredients or preparation methods.	Ask families to share cultural recipes that can be adapted. *See Staff and Family Engagement, Section 1, page 15*
		Cook/chef training should include cultural awareness and traditional ingredients.
	Some children may have reduced acceptance of foods that are unfamiliar.	*See Mealtime Environment and Practices, Section 3, page 31*
Food procurement		
Purchase a proportion of food with locality in mind. • National sourcing: As a minimum, focus on Australian products. • Regional sourcing: If available in your supplier or retailer, focus on products from state-based or regional farmers. • Community/local sourcing: Connect with local manufacturers, farmers, markets or community food hubs. For example, purchase apples from the local apple grower.	Cost is cited as the main barrier for local food purchasing.	Buying produce in bulk at the height of growing season can be a cost saving strategy. Vegetables and fruits can be diced and frozen for consumption later in the year. This can also be embedded into the curriculum and include a cultural component – for example, in many cultures, foods are preserved when in season to be used later in the year (e.g. tomato passata).
		Irregular looking fruits and vegetables are often sold for less – these can be used in soups/stews.
	Ensuring food safety is paramount – some service staff have expressed concerns over food safety of locally sourced products.	If there are food safety concerns, start with lower risk foods such as fruits and vegetables.
	Time is a major factor – especially setting up the initial systems for local food purchasing which requires identification and connection with local suppliers or products, including delivery cycles.	Using a community food hub (where available) can reduce time spent on identifying local food suppliers. Hubs can also manage food safety/quality assurance.
	⚠ **For regional/remote services** Food costs tend to be higher in regional and remote areas, making local food purchasing harder to achieve. Availability of local options may be limited.	Buying produce in bulk at the height of growing season can be a cost saving strategy. Vegetables and fruits can be diced and frozen for consumption later in the year. This can also be embedded into the curriculum and include a cultural component – for example, in many cultures, foods are preserved when in season to be used later in the year (e.g., tomato passata).
Start small, (e.g. focus on one product line e.g. milk, a popular fruit or vegetable, or another staple like bread or pasta) and grow from there.		

Strategies	Challenges/considerations	Potential solutions
Onsite growing of small amounts of produce for learning, tasting, and supplementing menus, or partnerships with existing community gardens.	Space or cost may be an issue with setting up a garden.	Gardens can start small – for example starting with a few pots and containers. *See Section 6, page 77*
A local food procurement plan can guide service staff, and local procurement goals can ensure that local sourcing becomes a routine rather than relying on individual enthusiasm.	**Questions that could assist in setting up the food procurement plan** • Why is your service choosing to purchase local food? • How will you start with your local food purchasing (e.g. buying Australian produce in season rather than purchasing produce from overseas? Is there a local butcher or local farm?) • Have a look at your pantry and then look at which of those items may be sourced from local food providers • Fruit and vegetables – how much is local? • Meat – is there an opportunity to purchase from a butcher? • Grains – can you purchase Australian grown? • Are there opportunities/constraints regarding relationships with current food distributors that need considering? • What are the opportunities/constraints regarding availability of local food in your region? • Are there any food quality or safety concerns? • How do you know where products come from? • How can you best communicate with current suppliers about local procurement preferences? • Who are the best local food suppliers? • What other farmers or distributors could you be working with?	
Food Education		
Garden-based food education experiences help children learn where food comes from. *See Food Education, Section 3, page 70*	Limited or no garden.	For services without garden access, the Food Education module provides ideas for learning experiences that help children understand the journey from soil to plate. *See Food Education, Section 3, page 86*
Books and learning experiences can focus on teaching children where food comes from, to facilitate discussions around food from their local area.		
Children can learn about local food cultures through garden-based food education, books and stories. The vignette: A day in the Wilds, outlines some strategies and reflections for connecting to culture through the garden. *See Vignette, page 80 of this module*		
Excursions or incursions, or learning about a local farm, can connect children with place. *See Food Education, Section 3, page 99*		

CASE STUDY

Growing, caring for and cooking plants

The use of a service garden to teach sustainability, life skills and caring for Country

SERVICE	Margaret Ives Community Children's Centre
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, not-for-profit, community managed
AGE RANGE	Birth to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	82
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Norwood, SA



Background

Margaret Ives Community Children's Centre has incorporated their gardens into the everyday programming and experiences of children at the service.

The gardens run through a combination of staff, child and community cooperation, fostering the building of community, a sense of ownership and pride, and the distribution of maintenance workload.

The gardens provide learning opportunities that help children learn valuable life skills, along with an understanding of sustainability and caring for Country.

What did you want to do?

To give children the opportunity to:

- Build connection to Country, and care of Country by learning:
  - How important nature is.
  - How to take care of nature.
  - About the lifecycles of plants.
  - About sustainability.
- Build on the children's interests relating to gardening.
- Practice cooking skills.
- Practice turn-taking, teamwork, and numeracy and literacy in a fun and play-based way.
- Provide opportunities for children to do something while at the service that they may not have the chance to do at home.

What did you do?

Setting up the gardens

- The gardens started with staff and family consultation.
  - This was achieved through their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
  - PLCs are groups at the service that have representation from each of the service's rooms, as well as from families.
  - Within these groups, members discuss projects to implement at the service.
- The service applied for grants to help set it up.
  - Donations were also invited and accepted.
- Staff planned for a native garden and a kitchen garden.
  - A lot of work went into what, where and when to plant.
  - Much of this was done with the children as an educational experience that focused on:
    - > Seasonality of produce grown.
    - > How to look after the plants.
  - Educators also use books and tablet devices at the service to assist with this research.
    - > Children asked questions and educators looked them up with the children.
    - > They then looked at the answers together, with the educator facilitating the translation of the information for the children.
    - > They then made decisions together about the next steps for the garden.

Embedding in programs

- All staff program together every three weeks to talk about what they will be doing.
- The garden has become an embedded part of each day at the service and is automatically included in programs.
- Special programs:
  - The service runs a one term program called 'Eat a Rainbow'.
- Some of the food used is from the garden and some is purchased.
- The program aims to support children to:
  - Try different fruits and vegetables of all the different colours.
  - Increase acceptance of new foods.
  - Encourage the acceptance of more fruits and vegetables into their meals.

Who looks after the gardens?

- Educators, children, family volunteers, community.
- The educators are responsible for the daily maintenance of the gardens, along with the children.
  - This allows the distribution of workload, and teaches children about responsibility and caring for nature.
- One of the mothers of the service also volunteers in the garden.
  - She works with the local primary school as well, and includes children from the school to help with the service's garden.
  - This extra support also reduces workload for staff.
- The community are invited into the service twice a year to help prepare the garden beds for re-planting.

How do the children engage with the gardens?

- Staff take children out either individually or in groups, depending on how many children are interested in gardening that day.
- Children assist staff with checking the plants and watering.
- When the produce is ready to harvest, children are able to harvest with the staff and bring it into the centre to cook with if they wish.

The difference it has made

Growing, harvesting, cooking and tasting the produce and herbs from the gardens has made a big difference at Margaret Ives. Examples include:

- More cooking experiences
  - Cooking experiences with the children have increased since the garden started as children like to cook with what they pick.
  - Some of these experiences are planned and some are ad hoc.
- A sense of pride.
- The children are proud of what they have been able to achieve by growing, harvesting and cooking the plants themselves.
- Food exploration
- Children are tasting food they may not usually try as they have grown it themselves.
- Rich, embedded, everyday learning.
- The gardens have provided opportunities to learn about:
  - Different plants and a how they grow.
  - The importance of growing foods in the right seasons.
  - Lifecycles in nature.
  - Care and respect for the environment.
  - Environmental sustainability and responsibility.
  - Patience while observing the growth of the plants.
  - Food literacy.
  - Civics.
  - Literacy and numeracy.
  - Community and working together.
  - How to search for, interpret and use information.

Top tips

- Think about the space you have at your service before you start your garden.
- Knowing which spaces get sunlight throughout the day and the year will impact what you can grow and when.
- Include children in the process, this helps them:
  - Build ownership of the garden.
  - Increase their interest in caring for it and maintaining it. This can include:
    - > Consultation and research on what to plant according to children's interests and what they would like to try.
    - > Surveys on what the children would like to cook with the food they grow.
- Have passionate people driving the project.
- This has led to greater success in the garden at the service.
- Plan enough time to look after the garden, as it will thrive with proper maintenance.
- Engage with the community to help set up and maintain the garden.

When implementing these strategies services should ensure they continue to meet the relevant food safety, food allergy and regulatory requirements.

See Section 5, page 74

Regulatory, food safety and food allergy considerations

When implementing sustainable food practices, services should ensure that they continue to meet relevant regulatory, food safety, and food allergy requirements.

⚠ **Food safety requirements and ECEC regulatory requirements operate alongside each other and may both apply to the same activity.** Food safety requirements primarily address the safe handling, storage, preparation and provision of food, while ECEC regulatory requirements focus on children's health, safety, wellbeing, supervision and service operations. Services should identify and meet all requirements relevant to their circumstances.

The following sections highlight some key considerations for practice, documentation and further support.

Practice

- Ensure food practices comply with relevant food safety legislation, local council requirements, the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, and the National Regulations (Regulations 77-79), where applicable.
- If purchasing from local suppliers, check that suppliers have appropriate food business licenses to ensure they are complying with the food standards code.
- Ensure food allergen management are consistent with best practice.
- When purchasing food in bulk, use reusable, clearly labelled storage containers and stock rotation systems "First in First Out" to minimise spoilage while maintaining food safety.
- Clearly label and record all prepared, cooked, preserved, and batch-cooked foods stored for later use.
- Only food that has not been served or touched and has been stored and handled in accordance with food safety requirements should be repurposed.
- When surplus food is packaged by a food business such as ECEC for families to take home or for sale, the food business has a duty of care to ensure that the food is handled, processed, packaged and stored safely before it leaves the premises or is sold. Services that undertake this practice will need to address food safety protocols for this in their food safety plan.
- If your service is packaging surplus food for children to take home or for resale, discuss the activity with your food safety regulator to ensure that you understand and meet all applicable food legislation requirements.
- Food that is made and packaged on the premises where it is sold or given to families may not be required to carry a label. However, you must be able to provide families with information about the food's composition, ingredients and other information that would otherwise be required on a label, where requested.

Documentation

- Maintain food management documentation to support traceability of food, including records of suppliers, deliveries and food handling when required.
- Ensure that garden planning and maintenance complies with regulations and has undergone risk assessment.

See Section 6, page 84

Further support

- *See Menu and Meal Quality, Section 8, page 80*
- For food waste management practices, such as composting, check your state or local council requirements for food and garden organics to ensure you comply with local regulations.

Reflective questions

Educators

- *How well do the foods and cooking experiences we offer reflect both what's local and in season, and the cultural food practices of the families in our care?*