The pantry is empty and the refrigerator is bare. You know what time it is . . . time to shop for groceries. As you drive to your favorite grocery store, you already know the actions you are going take. You will enter the store, grab a buggy, and browse aisles upon aisles of products. After your cart is full and all items are checked off your list, you will head for the front to pay, hoping of course, to find the shortest and fastest checkout. But, what happens when you change things up? What happens when you decide to shop a different venue . . . say a farmers’ market? Well, in such a case, your traditional understanding of what it means to grocery shop has to change.

According to Dr. Christopher Sneed, Extension Specialist with The University of Tennessee Extension, the way consumers shop for food is based on a set of conditioned responses. “These conditioned responses guide consumers telling them ‘how’ to shop. In addition the conditioned responses help consumers’ process information and make decisions during the shopping experience.” When you shop at new or different retail venues such as a farmers’ market, your conditioned responses may no longer work. Thus, you must rethink how you shop. To help you make these shifts in thinking and to help you make the most of the farmers’ market shopping experience, Sneed offers the following suggestions:

✓ Arrive early, but not too early. For the best selection, be sure to arrive early to the farmers’ market. However, do not arrive too early. Many farmers’ markets have strict start times. Vendors may not be able to sell to you before the market officially opens.
✓ Bring a bag. It is a good plan to bring a bag or basket with you to the market. Unlike a grocery store, many vendors do not provide bags for your items.
✓ Have fun! Farmers’ markets are social, festive events. Take time to talk with your fellow shoppers and the vendors selling your food. Who knows? You may just learn a new way to prepare your favorite fruit or vegetable.
✓ Bring a cooler preferably one with wheels. Using a cooler helps protect your perishable items (cheeses, meats, dairy products) while you shop. In addition, a cooler will help you get these items home safely.
✓ Talk to the vendors. Unlike the grocery store, farmers’ markets allow you the opportunity to talk – in most cases – to the person who grew the food you are purchasing. Use this opportunity to your advantage, and ask away.
✓ Be prepared for choices – lots of them. At the farmers’ market, you may find more than one variety of the fruits or vegetables you are needing. Making a decision among all these choices
can be overwhelming. To help, talk with the vendors and the other shoppers. Both can help you make a selection that best meets your food needs.

- Ask questions. Don’t assume that all the foods at your farmers’ market are organic, grown in your community, or even grown by the vendor selling them. Markets have very different rules governing the types of items that can be sold. Asking the vendor is the best way to find out the information you need.
- Seek out the information booth, if available. This is a good place where you can ask questions about the market. If this is not available at your local market, contact the organizer to ask specific questions or ask the vendor who makes the guidelines for that specific market.

So, grab your favorite shopping bag and head out the door. A different (and fun) shopping experience is waiting for you.

UT Extension provides a gateway to the University of Tennessee as the outreach unit of the Institute of Agriculture. With an office in every Tennessee county, UT Extension delivers educational programs and research-based information to citizens throughout the state and provides equal opportunities in all programming and employment. In cooperation with Tennessee State University, UT Extension works with farmers, families, youth and communities to improve lives by addressing problems and issues at the local, state and national levels.

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