

Tips for Serving Local Foods on a Budget

Serving local foods in child care settings can be both beneficial for the children's health and supportive of the local economy. Here are tips to help you navigate budget constraints while offering nutritious meals:

Seasonal Menu Planning

- If you are new to local foods, start small. Consider featuring [Harvest of the Month](#) on your menu.
- Base your menu around [seasonal produce](#). Seasonal fruits and vegetables are often more abundant and less expensive when they're in season.

Partner with Local Farmers and Producers

- Establish partnerships with local farmers, farmer's markets, and food cooperatives. Buying directly from them often can result in lower prices compared to supermarkets. You may be able to find better pricing on organic products from local sources.
- Explore options for bulk purchasing or negotiating discounts for buying in larger quantities.

Use Minimally Processed Whole Foods

- Choose whole foods, such as grains, beans, and legumes, which are often more affordable and versatile than processed foods.
- Purchase whole chickens or larger cuts of meat and portion them in-house to reduce costs.

Incorporate Meat Alternatives

- Rotate plant-based protein sources such as beans, lentils, tofu, and tempeh into your menu. These are often less expensive than meat and can be locally or regionally sourced.

Preserve the Harvest

- Freeze food when it's abundant to extend the use of seasonal produce. This allows you to buy in bulk when prices are low and use it throughout the year.
- Pickle foods to extend their shelf life. Many fresh vegetables can be made into refrigerator pickles and will last longer than the produce would alone.

DIY Cooking and Baking

- Make items from scratch whenever possible. Use cooking tools like an electric pressure cooker or slow cooker to save time.
- Engage children in age-appropriate cooking activities to instill healthy eating habits and appreciation for locally sourced foods.

Grow Your Own

- Start a garden on-site or partner with a nearby community garden. By following organic growing practices, you can provide fresh, healthy produce for your child care program while involving children in the gardening process.

Join the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

- Produce grown in the garden can be used as part of the reimbursable meal and for nutrition education activities.
- CACFP funds can be used to purchase items for gardens such as seeds, watering cans, rakes, compost, and more if the produce grown in the garden will be used as part of the reimbursable meal and for nutrition education activities.

For information about WECA Food Systems support, contact [Catherine Hansen](#) and [Mary O'Connell](#), WEESSN Food Systems Coordinators.