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## Contest highlights local foods

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A food-eating contest will be held in Alachua County during May, but it's not one of those gross-outs in which people cram down hot dogs or oysters and hope they don't have a Roman incident - the polite competitive-eating phrase for hurling.

Instead, the contest is to see how much locally grown or produced food people can eat in the month. The goal is to create awareness of the local food movement and give a boost to area farmers, restaurants and grocers, said Stefanie Samara Hamblen of Hogtown HomeGrown, a Web site and newsletter dedicated to the effort.

"The local movement is growing here. I started Hogtown HomeGrown in November 2006. Since then the number of farmers' markets has doubled from Starke to Micanopy," Hamblen said. "My whole idea is that we can make political, social and environmental decisions with every meal. By choosing to buy local, we are putting our money where our mouth is. We are saying to government that we want our local producers and retailers to have an advantage."

Buying local - which is generally considered to be within about 100 miles - can be both easier and more difficult than some might think.

Forget shopping at the chain supermarkets if you want to find blueberries that were grown a few miles from your home or fish caught in the nearby Atlantic or Gulf. The chains must buy in bulk, so they buy from big suppliers.

But Ward's Super Market at 515 NW 23rd Ave. has in-season produce along with other locally made items such as honey, eggs and soap. Northwest Seafood in Gainesville and Jonesville carries fish caught off Florida's shores.

And you can meet the grower of your food face-to-face if you go to one of the farmers' markets around the area.

Ward's natural foods Manager Russ Welker said offering local goods helps local farmers, saves fuel and can ensure a food supply should national disruptions occur.

"We've been supporting the local produce growers for the last 30 years or more. This is the last of a breed of community stores," Welker said. "The philosophy is to support the local people who support us. The local philosophy also supports energy conservation. We're buying local and saving on transportation."

The local-food movement is growing nationally, spurred in part by books such as "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral" by Barbara Kingsolver and "The Omnivore's Dilemma" by Michael Pollan.

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People who sign up to take the Hogtown HomeGrown challenge must agree to eat meals from locally grown or produced foods. That can include meals at restaurants that are committed to buying locally. They must keep a log of their meals for the month. Hamblen said prizes will be awarded at a celebration at Westside Park on May 31.

For more information go to <http://hogtownhomegrown.com>.

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