



Veg to You

Organic vegetable box deliveries are changing the way we cook and dine. Flora Baker looks at the pros and cons.

Every Thursday afternoon, at some point between midday and 8pm, I walk down to the entrance of my local pub and twist the numbers of a battered combination lock that hangs from the clasp of a large wooden cupboard. Inside sits a collection of groaning plastic bags, each with their own tag. An occasional potato lies forgotten on a wooden ledge. I grab a bag labelled 'standard veg', shut the padlock again and saunter off, riffling through the week's vegetable offerings as I walk.

Living in East London means I'm a prime candidate for subscribing to Growing Communities, an organic vegetable delivery scheme run by a community of local people based in Hackney. Each week, they source produce from over 25 small scale farmers and growers in England and Europe. In return for a £12 direct debit payment, my flatmate and I receive an assortment of vegetables that might include a few potatoes, carrots, and onions, some broccoli, an aubergine, a bag of stir fry greens or loose leaf salad,

and usually an abundance of kale.

What's so tempting about a humble bag of muddy, misshapen vegetables? For some box scheme recipients, signing up for organic veg to be delivered to their homes – or picking up from a collection point instead of racing around the supermarket after work – is an easy way to cut corners from a busy lifestyle. It takes away the need to plan ahead. Your recipes for the week are dictated not by your own imagination, but by the variable contents of the delivery. If the week's veg haul includes cauliflower, rainbow chard and pak choi then your cooking centres around those vegetables.

For others, it's about supporting organisations with a low environmental impact. Eating organic food free from pesticides has long been popular from a personal health standpoint, but it also has global effects. The UK government has committed to cutting 80% of the country's greenhouse emissions by 2050, yet our industrialised food and farming system is currently



responsible for around 30% of those emissions. Plastic-wrapped vegetables at the supermarket – even the organic ones – have often been transported thousands of miles via air freight or raised in artificially heated greenhouses, whereas the produce used in most veg box schemes is grown by small-scale farmers dotted around the UK and mainland Europe. Supporting these organic farms means eating seasonal food, much less of which is imported and which doesn't require preservation techniques.

For my household, the weekly bag of Growing Communities veg provides us a chance to experiment with unfamiliar food, making the process of preparation more exciting.

Although I love to cook I suffer from a lack of food-related imagination and my stock set of tried-and-tested recipes quickly loses lustre. Thanks to Growing Communities I am more in touch with my food. I'm aware of vegetables I might never have cooked with – like discovering how to prepare an entire, unpeeled celeriac. I'm not a fussy eater so I relish the challenge of an unfamiliar ingredient, yet there are those who appreciate the concept of box schemes but not necessarily the contents of every box.

When Guy Watson Riverford in the 1980s, Britain's largest organic food supplier he sold whatever vegetables were in season, accompanied by an attitude of 'this is what we produce - like it or lump it.' But with at least 600 different box schemes now operating in the UK, the consumer is able to indulge a more fussy palate, whether it's a hankering for asparagus in the depths of the English winter or admitting a lifelong dislike of celery. Due to the threat of competition, the box scheme companies have to accommodate more individual preferences. Abel and Cole, one of the original box scheme pioneers, allows customers to tailor a delivery by opting out or swapping particular vegetables on either a per-week or 'never send' basis. They also pack recipe cards into the boxes to inspire culinary adventures. Growing Communities features an extensive online resource of the meals that can be cooked using that week's ingredients, while Riverford boasts a 'fruit machine like' phone app to generate recipes. In fact, Riverford's online offerings of fruit, veg, meat, dairy and drinks essentially mirrors an online supermarket order. The major difference is that fundamentally they provide organic, local produce, with a visible connection to

the farmers that grow it.

Loyalty and community is a deciding factor in the veg box scheme ethos. Within weeks of signing up to Growing Communities I felt compelled to visit their farmers market in Stoke Newington, where stalls are run by ultra-local farmers and growers and customers can interact directly with the people who provide their food – something notably absent in a supermarket. Growing Communities, also offers volunteering opportunities at their urban market gardens, allowing those with an interest to get their green fingers stuck into the soil and educating children about their relationship with food.



All this focus on healthy organic produce and supporting local businesses is redundant, however, if the cost and relative offsets of signing up for a veg box precludes people. My flatmate and I split the price, which makes it an economical choice, but we're keenly aware that we wouldn't usually spend so much on vegetables. Another downside of the box scheme is needing

to prepare the vegetables in order of their sell by dates. Organic produce has a shorter shelf life but the learning curve is steep when you're forced to discard produce when it goes bad quicker than expected.

Statistics from the Soil Association – the trade body which licenses organic products and represents organic farmers – show that the UK's organic market was worth over £1.86 billion in 2014. Four out of five households are buying organic produce and with shoppers under 34 years of age willing to spend the most on organic products it's encouraging to note that responsible consumption is important to a significant demographic.

Being involved in the culture of organic veg boxes alters many people's attitude towards food – and perhaps that's where the popularity lies. It injects excitement into the process of cooking, makes us aware of what we're choosing to eat and heightens awareness of the knock-on effects that we have as global consumers. Moreover, on a global scale, it means being part of an organisation that's trying to change what we eat, how we eat and how it's farmed. These organisations are working together with local farmers and communities to take our food system back from the supermarkets and create a practical alternative to how the food we eat is produced and distributed ■