

*From the Baltimore Sun*

# Consumers prefer local produce, study finds

## On the Farm -- Ted Shelsby

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The Maryland consumer may be the farmer's best friend.

The consumer's preference is to buy produce grown by Maryland farmers, and many grocery shoppers say they would be willing to pay more for local fruits and vegetables.

Those are a couple of the findings related to agriculture from the recent annual statewide public opinion survey by the University of Baltimore's Schaefer Center for Public Policy.

Slightly more than 75 percent of adults surveyed said they would be more likely to buy produce that is identified as having been grown by Maryland farmers.

That is a substantial increase since last year's survey, which found 57 percent of the consumers expressing a desire to purchase homegrown farm products.

Nineteen percent said it would not matter whether corn came from Iowa, chicken from Georgia or tomatoes from California or other parts of the country.

Three percent said they would be less likely to buy local groceries identified as having been grown by state farmers.

Not quite half of the respondents - 48 percent - expressed a willingness to pay a premium for farm products that would support

state farmers. Forty-two percent said they would pay between 1 percent and 20 percent more for local produce, while 6 percent said they would be willing to pay 20 percent or more for state-grown farm products.

The center said the survey was based on telephone interviews with 810 randomly selected residents from across Maryland. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.44 percent.

The gist of the agriculture-related responses was good news for Maryland farmers, said Gov. Martin O'Malley.

"It shows a positive consumer attitude with great potential for local farm products and an understanding by Marylanders that farms and agricultural products are an important part of our culture and economy," he said.

Asked how important it is for the state government to work to preserve land for farming, 96 percent of those surveyed said it was at least somewhat important. This was up from 88 percent last year.

Seventy-three percent said it was very important, and 3 percent thought it was not very important.

Roadside farm stands and farmers' markets are popular with consumers. Eight-two percent of the respondents said they had visited each in the past year. Pick-your-own farms attracted 32 percent of the consumers. There are about 73 farmers' markets throughout Maryland, state agriculture officials said.

The survey also found that residents are concerned about the environment, including pollution threats to the [Chesapeake Bay](#).

Respondents were read a list of possible threats to the bay and asked whether they thought each item had a major impact, a minor impact or not much of an impact on the health of the bay and its tributaries.

A large majority of the respondents - 88 percent - picked industrial discharge and sewage treatment as the most serious threat to the bay.

Farm runoff (65 percent), growth and development (63 percent), and storm run off from urban areas (52 percent) ranked high as possible threats.

"There is nothing more important to a farmer than healthy, productive land and water," state Agriculture Secretary Roger L. Richardson said in a statement.

"Farmers can't make a living or provide the healthy food, scenic views and strong quality of life that consumers want if they don't protect our natural resource."

The state Agriculture Department is using the survey results in its effort to persuade supermarkets to stock more local produce.

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