

Keep only the best on the plate

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More compact neighbourhoods are likely to support a greater number of grocery stores and have healthy food stores in close proximity. Photo: Getty Images

Foodies' fear that choices are going to be limited in the future is real. Only a handful of vegetables are available with vendors. This is when these shops are geared to cater to the majority and not those who crave the taste of Colocasia leaves in monsoon or the tangy taste of chakotra (grape fruit) in winters. People would like to consume locally grown foods but these have mostly disappeared from the market. In some cases, even the plants have disappeared owing to climate change or loss of habitat due to industrialisation. In other cases, the sellers do not find it profitable to get a particular food to the market just for a few palates. Even the tiny respite that wild pockets in urban areas offered — seasonal foods — is lost as such areas have been swallowed by concretisation. As urbanisation increases in India, it won't be too long before urban food deserts are created in the country just like they have come up in the USA. Urban sprawl increased the likelihood of any neighbourhood becoming or having a food desert in the USA where people had little access to food, according to a study published by researcher Shima Hamidi, director of Center for Transportation Equity, Decisions and Dollars at the University of Texas at Arlington. Food deserts are typically low-income areas where a significant number of residents live more than a mile away from a supermarket, big-box supercentre or other healthy grocery store in urban areas or more than 10 miles away in rural areas. The researchers found that about 20 per cent of residents in Dallas and Tarrant counties lived without any access to healthy food options. The good news for India is that researchers found that more compact neighbourhoods are likely to support a greater number of grocery stores and have healthy food stores in close proximity. India is a very compact country, courtesy the population. Other than this, India's uniqueness could be a saving grace. Unlike in the USA, where poor end up eating the worst food, Indian poor have better access to healthy food, albeit at a price. A good example is the roadside vegetable market in low-end Govindpuri in South Delhi, where a variety of fresh seasonal vegetables are available. But, the residents of posh Greater Kailash, which is mere 4 kilometres away, have access mostly to upscale departmental stores where only a limited variety of vegetables are available. In many upscale areas of Delhi, entry of vegetable vendors is greatly restricted. Online shops like Reliance Fresh and Big Basket, which have become popular alternatives, also provide a limited variety. Try buying a banana flower in Modern Bazaar, a supermarket with branches in New Delhi and Gurugram, and you will realise that the residents of Govindpuri are eating better. But things are changing here too. Common fruits and vegetables are cheaper and people tend to depend on them more. The Texas study researcher points out long-term solutions such as making communities more walk able and allowing a diversity of land uses to be beneficial in improving access to healthy food. This is one thing that Indian government too can think about in their urban planning as cities such as Delhi are now practically not meant for pedestrians and access to local haats (markets) is restricted as municipalities wield the whip against street vendors. These methods to increase access are important if we want to continue consuming foods that are grown locally and ones we saw in markets while growing up. Also important would be to increase the food basket. The Centre for Science and Environment's series

First Food

has showcased more than 200 such plants that have provided local communities with healthy and nutritious foods for generations.

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