

# Buy American

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Photo by Amanda Leung

No jingoist, I wouldn't have imagined adopting the concept of buying only American-made goods. After all, I support free trade (except in weapons of mass destruction) to strengthen the global economy.

But lately I have been thinking about the advantages of buying American and, for some items, purchasing even more locally – from our own region. The recent experiences with lead-painted Chinese toys are one impetus to purchase at home. But two other underlying trends strengthen this impulse.

First, the high cost of energy for transporting goods from faraway places is inflating the cost of merchandise, and burning all this fossil fuel is contributing to global warming. So if I can buy my raspber-

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ries from growers around the Bay Area instead of from Chile, the transportation costs and energy use are much less. Farmers in Santa Cruz County produce raspberries just as tasty as those from afar.

The second development is the state of the U.S. economy compared to our global counterparts. With our \$163 billion budget deficit, the U.S. economy is lagging behind the European Union, China, the Persian Gulf countries and even Russia. It is a little bit embarrassing, as well as financially challenging, when the value of the dollar drops below its Canadian counterpart for the first time in 30 years. Governments and private investors from these countries are scooping up U.S. assets at bargain prices, including our deflated real estate.

The picture, of course, is more complicated than simply asserting that buying U.S. goods supports the U.S. economy. Foreign companies have operations in the U.S., and U.S. companies have activities abroad. U.S.-made products often have internal components made in other countries. Buying foreign-made goods does contribute to the U.S. economy to some degree, and buying U.S. goods contributes to the global economy. But buying American-made products gives the strongest boost to our economy, providing jobs to American workers and strengthening U.S. manufacturers.

We have a huge consumer market in this country. Where possible, we should be using our own buying power to support our economy, as well as to decrease energy use. If the U.S. government formally adopts such a policy, intervening in markets through protectionism to bar the import of goods to the U.S. or supporting the prices of our goods,

it tends to spark a negative response from other countries. Other nations sometimes adopt their own price supports or protectionism in response, which becomes a self-defeating game of tit-for-tat. But if U.S. consumers simply make policy with their wallets, the impact will be there, without the risks of government policy.

The problem with all of this, as you have noticed if you have bought anything lately, is finding items that are made in the U.S. I needed to replace my fruit-and-veggie juicer recently, and tried to try to find a model made in the U.S. The typical U.S. brands – Black & Decker, Waring – were all made in China. Through extensive web searching, I finally found a Jack LaLanne-brand juicer that was described as “Made in the USA.” It was, of course, twice as expensive as the China-made models. And it probably had some foreign-made components inside. But it was also

stainless steel instead of plastic and at least twice as well engineered as the cheaper machines. For example, it has a feeder spout wide enough to accept a whole apple, instead of having to cut the apple into pieces to fit through.

What I discovered through this process is that few information resources are available to guide the buyer interested in purchasing from U.S. sources or more locally. There is a need for some good web sites that identify products as American-made and compare their characteristics.

Buying American may involve a few investments from the consumer. It requires label-reading, to determine where goods originate. It may involve buying more expensive items in the short run. But over time, prices on U.S. goods may come down, if the market for our own goods expands. And the quality and customer service may be better.

Shopping for local produce may require one to deny that craving for fresh blueberries in the middle of winter, but then again, eating seasonal produce is healthy and fun. One of the best, and most pleasant, ways to shop for food is at farmers' markets, which are now available in many communities. Local fruits and vegetables, locally made cheeses, locally baked bread, locally caught fish – what could be more delicious? One thing is for sure, and that is that most of the produce at farmers' markets is from sources no farther away than driving distance. And as the market for local produce expands, a wider range of produce will be grown throughout the year.

Now if Detroit would only build a car I want to buy . . . Ω