Fresh, local and organic may not equal sustainable

Are the organic hand-picked tomatoes sold at farmers' markets really more sustainable, or do they just make us feel noble?

The logic of farmers' markets is that the route from harvest to plate ought to be as direct as possible. But freshness doesn't equal sustainability: unless the supply chain is well?organised, losses can be considerable. And food losses come down to a waste of land, water, energy and chemicals used to produce what is discarded.

We can now design high-tech transport and storage techniques that slow deterioration and reduce loss.The industrial washing of packed and cut vegetable saves water compared with household?level processing. Modern greenhouses are now sustainable. No longer net?energy absorbers, pilot schemes show that they can produce surplus energy. Water is equally important. Here too, greenhouses optimise resource use.

Agricultural science has bred tomatoes with resistance to disease and pests, longer shelf-lives and better taste; while genetic techniques have sped up the breeding process. Such techniques do not always lead to genetically modified tomatoes. But they could lead to higher vitamin contents or other benefits.

Sustainable production means an optimal balance between outputs and inputs, including emissions of greenhouse gases, or water pollution. It does not prescribe rules about scale or methods of production. Nor does it bar technological innovations if they improve input-output ratios and decrease environmental or social costs. Thus sustainability as a concept forces us to think out of the box.

The belief that only small-scale, non-mechanised agriculture without the use of chemicals respects biodiversity is illusory. Small is neither sustainable nor beautiful in itself. Nostalgia for a romantic agrarian past is essentially Luddite. It blocks creative thinking.

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