

## Box schemes

Contributed by Wellington Womble

An interesting look at the way to go about avoiding supermarket shopping should you wish to do so, without making your life more difficult in any way.

I prefer to avoid supermarkets &ndash; I feel they're unfair to suppliers, overprice, over package, make vast profits (and spend it all on marketing) unfair to employees and impose ridiculous standards, creating massive amounts of waste &ndash; but what's the alternative? Well there are quite a few &ndash; from markets to buying direct, but one of the easiest and most convenient is the organic box scheme.

I've have two box schemes &ndash; we've been buying our meat in this way for years, from various suppliers, and I've had a vegetable and whole foods one since Christmas. I couldn't be happier with them.

Let's start with the meat &ndash; I have had a couple of different organic meat boxes &ndash; from [www.wellhungmeat.com](http://www.wellhungmeat.com), who send a box of meat (various sizes) on the first Thursday of every month, and provide a good range of cuts, and are guided by your preferences. I got cuts I wouldn't have bought, and experimented with them, and the box just turned up every month &ndash; no having to remember to order. We now have Higher Hacknell Farm meat, who run a similar mixed box scheme, but also allow you to supplement it with regular items, or pick a box from their range for a regular order &ndash; this is more convenient for us at the moment, as I can order a month's supply of bacon, for example, and not have to buy it elsewhere.

I think this is the key with box schemes &ndash; finding one that suits you. Here in the South East, it's hard to buy direct from farms (there aren't many farms, especially for veg) but we are well served with box schemes. Abel and Cole, Riverford and Fieldfare all deliver here now, so we're spoilt for choice. All have their own ways of doing things. Abel and Cole allow you to state likes and dislikes, and therefore don't send you things you dislike, avoiding waste, but don't include 'staple' items in their boxes. They try to be seasonal, and have a 'no air freight' policy. Riverford or River Nene send out a standard box, but allow you to view the box via the web at the beginning of the week, and make a decision on which box you'd like that particular week, based on the contents. They also make an effort to provide mainly seasonal British produce.

Fieldfare (my box scheme) also do dairy, whole foods, meat and toiletries - in fact, practically everything you could want. I chose this one for the range of products (meaning no more supermarkets for us), the fact that it's locally based and has some features that really suit us, and our way of eating. For example, they include potatoes, carrots and onions in every box. As we use a lot of these, this was sensible. I wanted to order a few other produce items on a standing order, like tomatoes, but not get double if they were already included in the box &ndash; no problem. The potatoes, onions and carrots in the box weren't enough, so they now include extra as standard for me. Best of all, I have a standing default order of a vegetable box, some basic dairy and other items which is a default order that comes every week, without fail, whether I remember it or not. Much easier than trekking out to the dreaded supermarket once a week, and as the vegetables vary anyway, we still get plenty of variety. And I don't come home with a trolleyful of 'things that just caught my eye' &hellip;. They also supply a large polystyrene box, which you keep somewhere safe, and they put your produce into it each week, so you don't have to be at home.

Of course, it's not a perfect system &ndash; occasionally things are out of stock (but only occasionally) sometimes I need something quickly, or we don't eat the cheese, and end up with double the following week. I have to plan what I want to eat nearly a week in advance, or put it together out of what we've got in the fridge on the day. And buying meat in bulk means we have to remember to take something out of the freezer for tea in the morning.

All of this, for us, is outweighed by the fact that the shopping automatically turns up, whether I remember it or not, and whether I'm in or not (we have the same driver every week, who leaves it in a big cool box, provided by Fieldfare, in the back garden, and who knows and gets on with the dogs, if they're out). We get fresh, organic, mostly seasonal produce. It varies, and sometimes we get new things I don't recognise and expand my repertoire a bit. It's cheaper &ndash; for the vegetables on comparing like for like with Waitrose, it turns out we spend about the same amount, but get (and therefore, eat) more veg. Other stuff works out slightly more expensive, but as I use what I have, and don't impulse buy, this works out cheaper for us. The delivery charge is less than most supermarkets, at £2, although some box schemes don't charge for delivery.

I almost never get produce below the standard I expect, and on the odd occasion I have, money has been refunded without question. We do, occasionally, get things we don't like, or don't normally use. This can be an advantage, as I found that although we don't eat much boiled cabbage, I learned to make coleslaw to use up the ones we did get. I reckon I spend less time and money on shopping, although perhaps a little more on cooking, but then, that means we eat better.

I almost never go to a supermarket &ndash; only about once a month for odd things that we like particular brands of say; dog treats, or Douwe Egberts coffee or Lindt chocolate (nobody's perfect!). There are lots of box schemes (try the links at the bottom) and most of them are expanding their delivery areas all the time. They all do a range of sizes and composition of boxes, the thing to do, is find one you think will suit and give them a go. You can always cancel it after a few weeks if it doesn't suit you, and you never know what surprises you might get.

<http://www.higherhacknell.co.uk/> - organic meat, box scheme and a la carte

<http://www.abel-cole.co.uk/> - organic vegetable box scheme &ndash; also supplies meat, fish and other groceries

<http://www.fieldfare-organics.com/> - my local organic box scheme &ndash; vegetables, meat, fish and convenience and whole foods &ndash; everything really!

<http://www.riverford.co.uk/en/> - vegetable box scheme, delivering over most of the south west of England, and the midlands

<http://www.soilassociation.org/web/sa/saweb.nsf/home/index.html> - The Soil Association - a fabulous organic directory, and a resource to help you find a local box scheme.