

farmers' markets: an idea whose time has come . . . again

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Are you going to experience the taste of a juicy, red, vine-ripened, hours-old tomato this summer? Or a freshly picked, locally grown tender ear of corn? Or a perfect, tree-ripened peach? If there's a farmers' market in your area, you can.

Direct marketing of fresh fruits and vegetables (that is, consumers buying directly from farmers) is the way many of our grandparents bought produce. We say it is an idea whose time has come . . . again, because it makes sense to reevaluate our produce-buying habits—in light of what's going on around us today.

. . . The Extension Service can be instrumental in the development of farmers' markets, giving agents an opportunity to help provide a worthwhile community service, increase small producer incomes, and teach organizational and leadership skills.

A series of studies completed by the Colorado State University Extension Service and the Colorado Department of Agriculture of farmers' markets in the state during 1978 and 1979 provided answers to the following questions:

1. Why do consumers shop at farmers' markets?
2. What role can Extension play in planning and implementing farmers' markets?
3. What are the components of a successful farmers' market?¹

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Why Shop at Farmers' Markets?

Inflation

Last year when the national inflation rate hit 13%, take-home incomes weren't keeping pace and many consumers were looking for ways to cut corners without cutting quality in food buying. Farmers' markets provided a logical solution during the summer months. Because farmers save on labor, packing, transportation, and other marketing costs, they're able to sell produce at lower prices at farmers' markets than what it costs at other retail outlets.

In one area of Colorado, consumers saved about 29 cents of every produce dollar when they shopped at the local farmers' markets instead of area grocery stores.² When surveyed at 3 other Colorado farmers' markets, consumers said they saved about 20% on produce over grocery store prices. Consumer demand during 1981 for these markets should be even greater because of continued inflation and the high unemployment rate.

Nutrition

Farmers' markets offer consumers the opportunity to buy farm-fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables. Farmers like to pick the produce they sell on the morning of the market day. Produce is often only hours old when it's bought. Peak flavor and nutritional value is preserved.

Compare this to produce sold by food supermarkets that's often picked before it's ripe and transported long distances. For those interested in what fertilizers or pesticides



A family activity for sellers.

might have been used on produce they plan to eat, farmers' markets offer the perfect solution—ask the farmer! Chances are he or she is right there.

*Food
Preservation*

Sometimes it's hard to find the right quantities of fruits and vegetables at the right prices to preserve for the winter months, thus stretching food savings through the year. Consumers at farmers' markets, however, have a "direct line" and can place their orders for bushels of peaches or peppers to be delivered at prime harvest time at a negotiated price.

Sharing and Fun

Besides providing a free outing that all members of the family can enjoy, farmers' markets provide mutually enjoyable social interaction between farmers and consumers. Old family recipes are shared, as are gardening tips. Consumers are introduced to things they've never seen before—such as popcorn on the cob, long Italian cucumbers, and deep-fried zucchini blossoms! Farmers enjoy getting to know regular farmers' market customers. It increases business when regular customers bring their friends to the roadside stands that many farmers operate in addition to selling at the market.

*Keeping Small
Producers Alive*

Many consumers like the idea that supporting farmers' markets helps keep limited-volume producers economically alive. Family farms are often unable to compete against large commercial farm firms. They don't grow large enough quantities to do business with packing plants or chain grocery store corporations. So, they're either forced to give up farming or develop new markets. The community farmers' market helps make the family farm a viable entity.

**Extension's Role
in Farmers'
Markets**

*Getting
Started*

The idea of the farmers' market is extremely compatible with the goals of the Extension Service. Since Extension agricultural agents already have contact with farmers, the agent with initiative, organizational skills, and some knowledge of how farmers' markets operate is the ideal person to get things started.

Our experience in Colorado indicates that farmers should be contacted individually, in person, to have the market concept explained to them and that there's a demand for this method of marketing food. Then a meeting of all interested farmers should be arranged.

*Organizational
Help*

The Extension agent can be effective in helping farmers deal with the "bureaucratic tasks" necessary in the develop-



Another busy day at the local farmers' market.

ment of a farmers' market. Certain licensing and tax advantages become available when a market organization incorporates. Federal, state, and local laws concerning weights and measures, health, zoning, and sales tax need to be considered when starting a farmers' market.³

Extension agents and specialists now have access to information about farmers' market organizations from states that conducted studies such as Colorado, as well as aid from government agencies. This is a real advantage in helping farmers get through the "red tape" of organizing. Agents can also promote leadership within the organization itself so that it can be self-sustaining.

Media Help

The Extension Service's established connections with the media—television, the newspaper, and radio—provide excellent advice on ways to advertise and create interest in farmers' markets.

Consumer Services

A well-run farmers' market offers the Extension Service the opportunity to serve many people in one place at one time. Information on drying, canning, and freezing fruits and vegetables provided by Extension home economists proved very popular with Colorado consumers at several farmers' markets in 1979.

Trouble Shooting

Once a farmers' market is established and the farmers involved have realized its potential, the Extension agent can play a less active role. A designated market master, secretary, and treasurer can handle fee collection, rules enforcement, paid advertising, and other market duties. The Extension agent can be available for specific problem solving or to help with new situations that may require his/her skills.

Components of Successful Farmers' Market

Locally Grown Produce

A good variety of locally grown produce is necessary. Quality, quantity, and selection are the key variables that determine how often consumers return to a farmers' market. Consumers expect fresh, high-quality produce at prices that are lower than or competitive with supermarket prices. While there are no magic numbers to determine what's enough produce, 5 to 7 pick-up trucks loaded with 15 different fruits and vegetables should be adequate to start.

Market Location

As in real estate, the three things to remember when starting a farmers' market are location, location, and location! Convenience for consumers, adequate parking, safe traffic control, and a pleasant atmosphere are things to strive for. A central location is a must for making the farmers' market a weekly shopping "habit." Creating an easy, pleasant shopping experience will encourage repeat business and positive word-of-mouth advertising.

Rules and Regulations

Farmers' market organizations should have enough rules to cover possible problems, but not so many that matters become unnecessarily complicated. Rules should state who's allowed to sell, geographical limits, quality standards for produce being sold, necessary fees and taxes and how they'll be collected, how produce will be sold (weight or volume), who will pay necessary market expenses, how consumer complaints will be handled, and whether arts and crafts, baked goods, prepared foods, or plants will be allowed.

Advertising

A sufficient number of consumers is critical to the success of any farmers' market . . . and an effective advertising campaign will deliver them. Surveys of Colorado farmers' market consumers indicate that newspaper advertising is the best way to reach market customers. This can be in the form of paid advertisements, coverage as a news event, or in the food or features sections of the newspaper. Large "FARMERS' MARKET" signs directing people from busy streets to the market are also effective. Signs or flyers in local businesses,

clever bumper stickers, radio talk shows, and school poster contests with a farmers' market theme all help give the market needed publicity.

Summary

Farmers' markets provide benefits to both farmers and consumers. With consumers' heightened nutritional awareness and increased need to stretch dollars, buying fresh produce less expensively makes a lot of sense. The Extension Service can be instrumental in the development of farmers' markets, giving agents an opportunity to help provide a worthwhile community service, increase small producer incomes, and teach organizational and leadership skills.

Footnotes

1. *A Guide to the Planning and Implementation of Farmers' Markets in Colorado Communities* (Fort Collins: Colorado State University, Extension Service, 1980).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Doing Business in Colorado: A Guide to the Legal Requirements for Dealing in Agricultural and Food Products* (Denver: Colorado Department of Agriculture, 1978).