



Farmers' Markets: About the Trend

Open-air farmers' markets--a growing trend--evoke fresh air, fresh produce and fresh faces. Learn about the farmers' market trend and how to find a market in your town and sell your farm's bounty for profit.

By Audrey Pavia

About the Author

A freelance equine writer, Audrey Pavia is a former editor of *Horse Illustrated* and author of *Horses for Dummies*. She has trained in western, hunt seat and dressage, and competes in NATRC-sponsored competitive trail riding. Audrey resides in Norco, California, with her foundation-bred Appaloosa gelding, Confetti's Valentine. While this may sound like a scene from a bygone era when consumers regularly purchased fresh foods from local farmers at open-air markets, it's becoming a common trend.

Shopping at farmers' markets is taking place around the country right now, almost every day—at farmer's markets everywhere. Let's learn about the trend--and renewed tradition.

Farmer's markets have long been a part of human culture, and began thousands of years ago when the first farmers had produce to sell and the first consumers had a need to buy it.

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Read Related Articles [CSAs Pick Farm Fresh Food for You](#) The tradition of farmers getting together and selling their products directly to customers has been around a lot longer than the mega grocery stores and produce brokers we see today. In fact, for most of human history, such open-air markets were the only way most people could access a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables. It wasn't until after World War II, when big growers and big supermarkets came onto the scene, that farmer's markets took a back seat in the mind of the consumer.

2000 USDA Farmers Market Statistics

Farmer's markets are an important source of revenue; 19,000 farmers reported selling their produce only at farmer's markets. 82% of markets are self-sustaining; market income is sufficient to pay for all costs associated with the operation of the market (not including grant or in-kind support).

58% of markets participate in the USDA's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) coupon, food stamps, local and/or state nutrition programs.

25% of markets participate in gleaning programs aiding food recovery organizations in the distribution of food and food products to needy families. While supermarkets filled with a wide variety of produce still sell the majority of fresh foods in the United States, the farmer's market is making a comeback. More and more, buyers are recognizing the many benefits of buying produce directly from the farmer.

"Farmer's markets are definitely growing in popularity," says Tammy Bruckerhoff, horticulture marketing specialist for the Missouri Department of Agriculture. "More of them are popping up all the time. In fact, I have two or three communities that are starting them up for the first time this year."

Zachary Lyons, director of the Washington State Farmers Market Association, agrees. "Farmer's markets have become so popular with community organizers that there are not enough farmers to fill them," he says.

Statistics from the Department of Agriculture support this viewpoint. From 1994 to 2000, the number of farmer's markets in the United States has grown by 63 percent. And according to the 2000 "National Farmers Market Directory," over 2,800 farmer's markets are operating in the United States today.

The reason for this booming popularity has been examined by the USDA, and Bruckerhoff concurs with their findings.

[Find a Market Near You](#)



Finding a farmer's market near you is easy if you have access to the Internet. The United States Department of Agriculture maintains the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) Farmers Market Page website (www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets) with an accessible database of farmer's markets around the United States.

Addresses, names and phone numbers of contacts, and days and hours of operation are listed. Once you locate a market that interests you, contact the organizers to learn about that particular farmer's markets rules and regulations. "Food safety and access to local products are two important reasons cited by the USDA for the growing popularity of farmer's markets," she says. "People are more removed from the farm, but remember that the best tasting, best quality produce was raised by mom, dad, grandma or grandpa on the farm. The next best thing to that now is the farmer's market."

Another reason for the success of farmer's markets is the resurgence of new and beginning farmers. "People from the city who buy 10 to 40 acres out in the country want to grow something on it, to get a return on the investment," says Bruckerhoff. "So some will start raising vegetables or fruits, and then sell them at the farmer's market. This also allows them to meet people in their community."

Why Markets are Great for Growers

Farmer's markets provide plenty of benefits to consumers, who stand to gain fresh produce they can purchase directly from the grower. But what are the benefits to the seller? Why not just go through a produce broker and sell your produce at the supermarket where volume is high? "Profitability is the primary benefit to farmers who sell at a farmer's market," says Lyons. "By selling through this avenue, the farmer has direct access to the retail dollar. The farmer is still paying market fees, but generally speaking, a grower can expect to take home 90 percent of the retail dollar. This is a huge percentage considering so many growers selling to packing houses making as little as 10 percent or less for a crop. Nowhere else in the produce market is that true retail dollar realized."

Lyons also notes that farmer's markets are great for growers because they are where the customers gather. "People know they can get fresh products at these markets, so they patronize them," he says. "In fact, the more farmers at the market, the better for the farmers. Growers do better because consumers like variety even though they tend to buy from the same farmers every week. When they see a lot of farmers at a market, people feel better spending more money with the farmers they have bonded with."

According to Lyons, some growers avoid farmer's markets because they feel the competition from other farmers is too great. "Some growers worry because other farmers are there selling the same product, and that means competition," he says. "If a grower shies away from selling something at a market because of other competitors, he or she shouldn't be in business. It's a fact of business that consumers feel more comfortable spending money when they have the option to choose. When there are a lot of bakeries in an area, each bakery sells more. It's the same with restaurants. The more restaurants in one section of town, the better business is for each of them."

Jeffrey Rhodes, an insurance salesman and part-time grower of persimmons and pomegranates in Fresno, Calif., sells through several different markets in Northern California and is a big advocate of farmer's markets. "All my farming income comes from selling at farmer's markets," he says. "It's half of my total income for the year."

In addition to the profitability of farmer's markets, Rhodes also sees a number of other benefits to participating in this age-old way of selling produce.

"When you sell at an established farmer's market, you know exactly how much you are going to earn on a daily basis," he says. "If you are shipping through a broker, they quote you a price and then adjustments come back and you are not sure for another month how much you actually made. With a farmer's market, you can look at your spreadsheet and say 'This was my profit for the day.'"

Markets Offer Outdoor Networking

While farmer's markets are a great way to boost a grower's income, they also provide a chance for both farmers and buyers to interact. Rhodes particularly enjoys the social aspect of farmer's markets and looks forward to the chance to meet his customers. "It's fun to talk to customers and get feedback on my produce," he says. "When I grew tomatoes, for example, I could find out exactly what variety the customers liked best."

Because Rhodes consistently sells at the same farmer's markets, he has been able to get to know his customers on a first-name basis. "I try to memorize 10 to 15 customer's names' at each market," he says. "I like to greet people by name when they shop from me, or if I just see them walking by my stand."

According to Lyons, customers know they have the opportunity to talk directly with growers, which is a big reason they like



to shop at farmer's markets. "When customers buy at a grocery store, many know that so-called fresh produce can be a week to three weeks old. The customer doesn't know who grew it or where it came from, or what's in it. At the farmer's market, customers can ask farmers how they grew the produce, whether they use chemicals, et cetera."

Farmers stand to gain by networking with each other at farmer's markets too, according to Bruckerhoff. "The Warrenton Farmers' Market was started in 2000," she says. "Two farmers met at the market one day and found out that their farms are only about 5 miles apart from each other. They also found out that they both wanted to be full-time vegetable producers, but both needed markets. One had some equipment, supplies and land that the other did not, but the other had equipment, supplies and land that the other didn't. They have since joined their efforts, to the benefit of both."

How Growers Can Get Started

Growers of just about any size can benefit from participating in a farmer's market, and will find it relatively easy to get involved. The steps to selling your produce in a farmer's market environment include getting a business license (if you don't already have one), finding a suitable market near you, researching that market's rules and guidelines, and pulling together the equipment you'll need to actually sell your goods.

"At our market, prospective members must apply and be accepted at least one week before being allowed to sell at market," says Ed Lopata, market manager for the Brattleboro Area Farmers Market in Brattleboro, Vermont. "Each member is encouraged to actively participate in the organization. Members are also asked to attend the annual meeting and also to contribute two to four hours of additional work to the market."

According to Lyons, it's important to investigate a number of markets before you actually commit to one. "Before you plant a lot in anticipation of selling at a market, talk to individual market organizers first and know you have a place to sell," he says. "Just because the market is there doesn't mean you can automatically sell at it. Make sure they have space. And markets are diverse, so do plenty of research."

Once you have chosen a market you think will work best for you, start thinking about equipment. The exact items you'll need to set up shop at a farmer's market depends on the produce you are selling. However, all vendors need a table and a canopy. Attend the market a few times beforehand to get a sense of the signage and other materials that your fellow vendors are using.

Tips for Selling Your Goods

Once you have made arrangements to sell at a farmer's market, prepare to bring your best produce. "Offer only your best stuff," says Lopata. "And offer something that is a little bit different."

Lyons points out that it might take some time to get the feel for which produce will do best at a particular market.

"When you are just getting started, don't think too big," he says. "Experiment. Find out what you are good at and bring that to market. Don't think you are going to make a killing right off the bat. People have to get used to you, and you have to get used to what you are doing. When getting started, it's important to realize that big volume markets might not be best for you."

Once you have your stand set up and are greeting potential buyers, keep customer service in mind. "Sell, but don't hawk your produce," says Lyons. "Interact with people. Don't just sit on your stool without making eye contact and expect the produce to fly off your stand. Put your personality into it. If your farm is a family business, send someone to the market that can interact with people."

To keep other farmers in your good graces, be sure to keep your produce prices in line with that of the other sellers. "Remember, this is a business," says Lyons. "Market organizers sometimes get distressed by hobby farmers because they don't always treat farmer's markets as a business. Vendors are trying to make a living. Don't come in thinking that you don't need the money and then sell stuff really low to get rid of it. The other farmers will hate you!"

Lyons points out that farmer's markets are a great way for small growers to make a profit selling what they love to produce.

"Farmer's markets are incubators for business," he says. "Use them that way. These markets are there to help businesses grow and help you get on your feet as a farmer."

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