



Cultivating the Farmers' Market

Research shows that farmers' markets are gaining in numbers and popularity.

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Refresh Your KnowledgeThe U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) began tracking farmers' markets in 1994 and published the National Directory of Farmers Markets, listing all operating markets in the United States. The directory—updated every two years—indicates the number of farmers' markets in operation has more than doubled in the last 12 years, increasing from 1,755 markets in 1994 to 4,385 in 2006. Those numbers are expected to continue climbing when the list is updated this year.

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Farmers' markets are ideal avenues for hobby- and small-farm operations to market their products directly to consumers. These markets bypass the middleman and allow farmers to: sell produce at retail prices receive payment at the time of sale open up opportunities to enhance a community's economy increase nutritional and environmental awareness

Consumers also benefit from these markets by gaining access to locally grown produce fresh off the farm. They can interact fact-to-face with producers to gain insight into the farming practices and principles used to grow the products they're purchasing. Many look at it as more than another purchasing outlet: They see them as a social experience.

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Researchers attribute the strengthening popularity of farmers' markets to escalating consumer interest in healthier, more environmentally sound food production and in supporting local economies and farmers. They also credit organizations such as the national Farmers Market Coalition and the North American Farm Direct Marketing Association for providing "a centralized mechanism for developing, expanding, and supporting farmers markets."

In addition, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service offers technical assistance to producers and organizers looking to construct or renovate facilities for farmers' markets. They collaborate with state and local governments or nonprofit agencies to develop facility designs, estimate costs and predict market support.

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Organic production is also impacting the patronage and sales at farmers' markets. The USDA released a report, "Organic Produce, Price Premiums, and Eco-Labeling in U.S. Farmers' Markets," that is based on phone surveys with farmers' market managers in more than 20 states. In addition to the information above, the survey results ascribe the success of farmers' markets to heirloom and specialty produce, fair pricing and high quality.

The data revealed that organic growers participated in four-fifths of the 210 markets, and represented approximately one-third of regularly attending farmers during the 2002 season. The markets with the strongest demand were typically located near urban areas as well as universities and centers for higher education, religious communities and holistic health care facilities. Demand in more rural areas was linked to local access to well-priced, fresh, organic foods that are often only available through grocery chains in distant cities or towns.

This growing interest led several market managers to seek the participation of additional organic farmers. In instances customers showed reluctance to purchase organic products, the cause was a perceived expectation of higher prices



rather than the actual cost: Approximately 40 percent of the markets with participating organic farmers did not request premium prices.

Overall, it would seem that farmers' markets play an important role in supplementing income for small- to medium-sized farms. In combination with increased consumer awareness and demand for higher-quality, more sustainable production practices and locally supported agricultural movements, farmers' markets will continue to grow ever more popular and successful.

For more information on farmers' markets in your area, check out Hobby Farms farmers' markets resources list. Read more in a recent article on farmers' markets.

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