



# Keeping farmers' markets strong and sustainable

*In the past 35 years, farmers' markets have soared.*



*In the early seventies, the United States had a scant 340.*

*Two years ago, some 4,400 dotted the landscape.*

*A lot has changed over the years. Words like “organic,” “antioxidant” and “trans fat” pepper our vocabulary, suggesting intense interest in nutritious food. As a result, we’re flocking to farmers’ markets. In today’s fast-paced, high-tech world of global trade – and global warming – we want a tomato that tastes like a tomato, grown in our community, by someone we know.*

*This booklet shows why farmers’ markets are good for us and tells what UW-Extension is doing to keep farmers’ markets in southeastern Wisconsin strong and sustainable.*

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**F**armers' markets are a hot item.

Not only do they offer fresh, healthy produce, they're festive and fun.

But what makes one market a success while another languishes?

How profitable are farmers' markets for farmers?

Why do customers return, every week, all season, to the same market?

What role do market managers play in a market's success?

Over the past two years, UW-Extension educators surveyed customers, vendors and market managers at 22 farmers' markets in southeast Wisconsin to find answers.

We discovered that not only are farmers' markets good for our health, they're good for our economy, our environment and our community.

*Workshops that teach marketing and management skills to market managers, and show vendors how to make more money, create eye-catching displays and incorporate customer feedback are part of UW-Extension's strategy to keep southeastern Wisconsin farmers' markets going strong.*

# Farmers' markets are good for the economy

**M**any still remember the roadside markets of the Depression where farmers would pull their trucks to the side of the road and sell produce.

Although this helped many family farms survive hard times, once the economy improved and wholesale prices rose, most farmers lost interest in selling directly to customers.

## A return to the 'good old days'

New farming practices relied more and more on technology and machines. As machines replaced labor, wholesale markets changed.

Farmers with lots of land and specialized equipment dominated. Small and medium-sized farmers had a harder time making a profit, leading to the loss of many family farms throughout the 1980s.

In a return to "the good old days," some family and smaller farms discovered that marketing directly to consumers was one answer to their economic woes.

## Wholesale prices don't cover costs

Today's farm marketplace is heading in the same direction.

Farmers receive an average of only 20 cents on the dollar for products sold wholesale. For small and medium-size farmers, this doesn't even cover the rising cost of growing their products.

For these businesses, farmers' markets are critical. Farmers who sell directly to consumers capture 100 per-

cent of every dollar, which helps keep them farming.

## Markets attract jobs

Farm families aren't the only ones who benefit from farmers' markets. Communities also benefit.

Farmers' markets not only create on-farm jobs but jobs at businesses patronized by market visitors. A study of the Granville Island Public Market in Vancouver shows that the market created 3.2 full-time and 4.3 part-time jobs per vendor.

Farmers' markets keep money in the community.

Farmers and their employees pay taxes, buy goods and use services, keeping money flowing in the local economy that might otherwise be spent overseas or on imported goods.

## Markets teach business skills

Markets serve as business incubators. Because of low start-up costs, farmers' markets give farmers a chance to test new products and ideas without a lot of risk.

What's more, they give farmers the opportunity to develop crucial business skills. Interacting one-on-one with customers helps farmers improve their product mix, gain customer-service and pricing skills, and develop a viable business strategy.

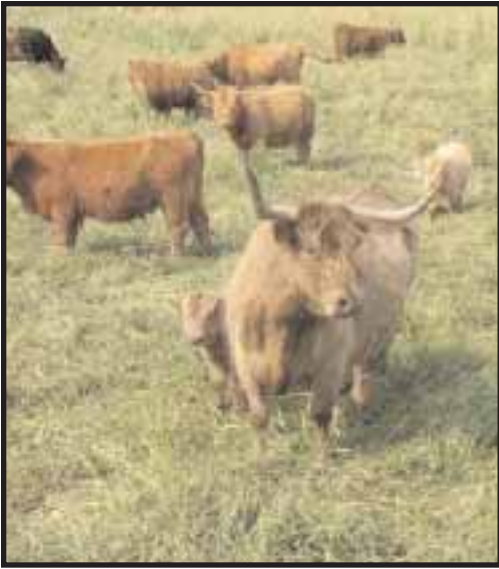


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*In a sense, the popularity of today's farmers' market represents a return to the 'good old days' when farmers sold fruits and vegetables directly to customers from a truck on the side of the road. Markets help keep jobs in the community, offer a fun place to shop and serve as business incubators where farmers can test new products.*



# Farmers' markets are good for the environment



***Buying local, sustainable products, such as this pasture-raised Scottish Highland beef, reduces transportation and packaging costs. The result is a natural product, healthier environment and smaller carbon footprint.***

In an era of carbon footprints and alternative fuels, farmers' markets have found a niche as an environmentally responsible choice. Buying local fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy products has less impact on the environment. Only recently, though, have we begun to understand the true value of eating locally.

## **Less packaging, transportation**

The greatest impact of eating local is less waste. In general, farmers' market products have been produced with fewer pesticides and require less transportation and packaging than conventionally grown produce.

For example, most items are not picked in one container, shipped in another and packaged for sale with yet more cardboard and plastic. Local growers reuse containers and waste less.

## **Reducing waste**

Large wholesale producers limit what they sell by size, appearance and ripeness. Many fields are picked just once with the remainder left to rot. If markets are glutted and prices low, whole fields may go unpicked.

Fresh-market growers seldom waste anything they can sell. Fields are picked repeatedly to bring the freshest and most flavorful produce to market and optimize per-acre value of production. Making the most of what they grow by reducing waste helps small farmers realize enough of a profit to stay in business.

Fresh-market growers also use fewer pesticides. One reason is crop diversity. Fresh-market growers produce a variety of items, which limits the spread of pests and diseases. Even serious pest problems seldom affect more than one or two crops. The loss of two crops may hurt profits, but will seldom prove financially devastating.

Since they pick regularly, farmers' market vendors can closely monitor pest problems and determine what amount of disease or insect damage is acceptable – without applying pesticides – and what warrants treatment.

Applying pesticides is expensive and time consuming, and fresh-market growers tend to refrain from spraying unless absolutely necessary.

## **Shrinking your carbon footprint**

As a rule, local agricultural products require less transportation. The average mouthful of food travels 1,500 miles from the field to your plate.

An estimated 40 percent of the trucks on our highways transport food. Thus, buying local food can help the environment by lowering transportation costs. By eating locally and seasonally, the average family can shrink its carbon footprint 20 percent.

Patronizing farmers' markets helps the landscape. How? By helping keep the farms you see along the highway in business. Supporting farmers' markets translates to supporting local agriculture, preserving a rural landscape, which might otherwise be developed.

# Farmers' markets are good for the community

A festive atmosphere and the promise of social interaction – not just fruits and vegetables – draw people to farmers' markets. Farmers' markets are a place where neighbors visit, classmates reunite and bonds form between farmer and customer. In a high-tech, low-touch world, they serve as conduit for uniting neighbors and creating a sense of community.

## Farmer-to-customer connections

Perhaps most important, farmers' markets give farmers and community members a chance to meet and connect. Customers learn about life on the farm and how food is produced. They ask about new products, express opinions on growing practices and reminisce about their childhood on the farm. Likewise, farmers build bonds with fellow farmers, share experiences and learn from one another.

## Community connections

Nowadays, farmers' markets aren't just a place to buy and sell produce. Processed goods, such as honey, jam, bread and sweet rolls, as well as hand-made jewelry and other crafts, round out many markets.

Farmers' markets also offer a forum for education, entertainment and activism, with community organizations setting up booths and nonprofits holding fundraisers. In short, farmers' markets give people a place to connect and build a sense of belonging.

For communities with limited access to fresh products, farmers' markets bring fresh, seasonal fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy to urban neighborhoods, giving people a choice in how they spend their food dollars and broadening the range of available products.

Many communities have ethnic and historical traditions involving unusual items that can only be found at specialty shops. Farmers' markets help fill this void. During weekly markets, farmers have a unique opportunity to work face-to-face with customers to fill demands for products that may be too specialized for grocery stores to carry.

## Looking for elk? Try a market!

Farmers' markets often offer hard-to-find items, such as bison and elk, and products grown by alternative methods, such as pasture-raised poultry, IPM (integrated pest management) apples and fresh organic herbs.

By voting with their dollars, farmers' market customers can have an impact on production practices and support products they might not be able to find elsewhere.

Thanks to USDA programs, low-income citizens have more options for spending their food dollars on healthy products. A new program allows WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) participants and low-income seniors to redeem USDA coupons for fresh fruit and vegetables at farmers' markets.



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*Farmers' markets serve as a community gathering place where people meet, learn how their food is raised and discover unusual or hard-to-find products.*

*Markets also offer a forum for education, entertainment and activism, giving people a chance to connect and build a sense of belonging.*

# Survey results: What makes a successful market?



*Customers return to the same market, week after week, all season, because of product quality, contact with farmers and because they enjoy the fun, festive atmosphere.*

As farmers' markets spring up across Wisconsin, the question arises: What makes a successful market?

To find out, over the past two years, UW-Extension educators surveyed 279 customers, 218 vendors and 16 market managers at 22 farmers' markets in southeastern Wisconsin – home to some of the most successful and long-running markets in the state.

Our goal is to offer accurate, practical information to the people creating and maintaining successful, sustainable farmers' markets in southeast Wisconsin.

Here's what we found:

## Customers

Without customers, farmers' markets wouldn't exist. The question markets need to answer is: How do we attract customers, and how do we keep them coming back?

### What brings people to markets?

- Word of mouth is the most common reason first-time visitors come to a market.
- Proximity, usually living within five miles, is the next most common reason.
- Road signs in high-traffic areas, plus ads in newspapers, flyers and postcards, also draw visitors. Few markets pursue these advertising strategies, however, so it's hard to measure their impact.

Once people experience a farmers' market, they seek out other markets. Although many customers regularly visit one market, they enjoy seeing others.

Most "regulars" attend two to four other markets a year. However, exceptions exist; two markets we surveyed have a history of loyal customers who attend only those markets. Interestingly, these markets were also the only two that customers described as "festive" and "having a strong social aspect."

### Catering to customers

Different markets draw different crowds. Some attract people from miles around; others enjoy strong neighborhood support. Most farmers' market attendees travel fewer than 10 miles to visit a market. However, the distance a customer travels does not indicate market success.

We found that the most successful markets know their customers and design the markets to fit customer needs, whether customers travel two or 20 miles to get there.

### Quality is key

Once a person visits a market, what brings them back?

- Product quality.

Customers come back because they want corn picked that morning and tomatoes that taste like tomatoes. In short, people find time to visit farmers' markets because they want fresh, tasty food when they sit down to a meal.

- Farmer contact is the second most common reason.

Somehow, direct contact with the grocery store produce manager isn't the same as talking to the farmer who planted, nurtured and picked a melon to bring it to the farmers' market just for you.

People want to feel a connection to the farmer and their food. They want a say in how their food is grown and which products come to market.

- Social aspects, including meeting new people and talking to friends, bring people to a market.
- Environmental concerns draw visitors. People want to know how and where their food is grown and how that affects the environment.

## vendors

Market vendors wear many hats. They're growers, business managers and marketers. Many work 12 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week, most of the year. It's almost surprising they greet customers with a smile.

### Not all vendors are 'farmers'

- Not all vendors are what we think of as traditional farmers.

Nearly half (42 percent) choose not to farm or are unable to make a living farming. They are retired, have a business on the side or are trying their hand at farming. Some would like to farm for a living but are limited by land availability and start-up costs. Or they may depend on another job for income or health insurance.

### Vendors sell at multiple markets

- A third of vendors sell at only one market, with half selling at two or three markets a week.

Vendors who sell at only one market are often part-time or full-time farmers with other sales outlets. Full-time farmers are more likely to sell at multiple markets. Some markets are open two or three days a week. Fifteen percent of vendors sell at four to six markets a week, and 4 percent sell at seven or more.

It isn't enough to grow fruits, vegetables or meat – you have to sell it for more money than it cost to produce.

### Markets define 'local' differently

- Most vendors are local.

Markets have different definitions of local. Some define local as "regional," some "statewide." Others include multiple Midwestern states or vendors within a certain distance of the market.

Some markets give preference to growers who live close to the market, but may allow specialty products, such as maple syrup or cranberries, to come from a distance.

Most vendors (68 percent) at southeastern Wisconsin farmers' markets travel less than 25 miles to the market. Another 19 percent travel 25 to 39 miles. Only 13 percent travel more than 40 miles to farmers' markets.

As fuel costs rise, markets depend increasingly on local growers. Without a corresponding rise in grower prices, it doesn't pay to haul products to distant markets.



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*Successful vendors not only have excellent products, they are skilled marketers who develop long-term relationships with customers.*





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*Farmers bring their products to farmers' markets, not just to make money, but to interact with customers and other farmers. Like customers, they enjoy the market atmosphere and the give-and-take with diverse participants.*

## Farmers absorb cost increases

How much does price matter? Vendors and customers alike say price isn't the primary reason they come to the market. Customers say they think prices are good to excellent. As for farmers, many (66 percent) say they are satisfied with returns. A third say prices could be better.

Despite inflation and rising fuel costs, prices at southeast Wisconsin farmers' markets have stayed level for many years. Nearly half the vendors (48 percent) say they haven't raised prices in the last five years. The logical conclusion is that many sellers are absorbing cost increases.

While some farmers fail to raise prices even in the face of rising production costs, many who want to raise prices don't do so in order to stay competitive. Underpricing may have less impact on part-time and hobby growers, but it undermines the ability of full-time farmers to make a living.

## Farmers at work – and play

That said, vendors don't come to markets just to make money. They enjoy selling at farmers' markets. It gives them a break from farm labor and a chance to interact with customers and other farmers.

After working hard all week, it's nice to hear someone compliment their apples or poultry. It's a way to socialize and work at the same time. Like customers, farmers say they enjoy the market atmosphere. Markets give farmers a chance to advertise products, make contacts and receive feedback. What's more, markets offer a convenient way to sell produce.

Vendors are constantly experimenting and conducting market research. Naturally, they want to be first with orange cauliflower or honeycrisp apples. Because they are always trying new things and working at staying ahead of the competition, vendors have a lot to say about how well markets meet their needs.

Most sellers express satisfaction with market location, hours, days and season length. However, farmers say they'd like to see more advertising, more customers, a more varied product mix and fewer vendors offering the same product. Which is where market managers come in.

## market managers

Market managers juggle countless tasks. They recruit farmers, attract customers, manage vendor mix and product diversity, enforce rules and mediate disagreements. They create marketing materials, design promotions and stage events. Some serve as accountants, balancing vendor fees and market expenses. They perform these duties with varying degrees of success, based on skill, interest and time.

## Managers a diverse group

Some market managers are assigned the task by a municipality. Others play a dual role as vendor/manager. And some are neither municipal employees or vendors, but individuals who happen to be passionate about local foods and farmers' markets. Each has advantages and challenges.



Almost half the farmers' markets in southeast Wisconsin have financial support from a city, town or village, with these entities supplying a staff person to manage the farmers' market.

There are several advantages to markets that have managers supported by municipalities. Since managers work for a salary, vendor fees need not go toward paying a manager. Such managers often have longevity. What's more, they're familiar with municipal policies and practices, which can save time and frustration.

### Some managers assigned

When a person with a passion for farmers' markets is in this position, markets can flourish. However, disadvantages to this kind of support exist. For example, often vendor fees are not reinvested into the market but used to cover staff time and government expenses.

A municipality may assign a manager who has no personal interest in developing and sustaining a farmers' market. Managing a market outside normal working hours can also pose problems.

An employee assigned to manage a farmers' market may work 9 to 5, Monday through Friday. When markets occur in the evening or on weekends, many managers are not on site to direct vendors, enforce rules and offer information.

### Not in it for the money

Volunteer managers make up 20 percent of managers; paid managers make up 30 percent. Payment usually comes from vendor fees.

Many managers are passionate about farmers' markets and local food. To commit one or more days a week, three to six months a year, especially on Saturdays, to a farmers' market takes a special kind of devotion. Committed managers like these invest in the market and the community.

However, markets that spring up without governmental support, from the grassroots, also have challenges. These include finding a permanent location, and identifying and complying with local zoning and health rules and regulations. Some managers run a farmers' market while holding down a full-time job at the same time.

### Success hinges on manager

Whatever their background, managers are key to the success of farmers' markets. Good on-site managers understand both customer and vendor needs.

They develop a market based on requests, say, for eggs, mushrooms or bedding plants. When the need arises for a coffee vendor, baked goods or crafters, a good market manager responds. With the time and desire to meet the needs of buyers and sellers, market managers shape markets into a reflection of their communities, enabling a market to grow and flourish.

### Mediators & money managers

Good market managers know how to attract and keep good vendors and help them succeed. Even the smallest market (southeastern markets range from five to 65 vendors), needs a capable organizer. Experienced managers coach vendors on signage, pricing, customer service and product mix.



*Behind every successful farmers' market is a skilled manager with a knack for customer service, advertising, money management, mediating vendor disputes, balancing product mix and, perhaps most important, dealing with people.*



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***Successful farmers' markets generally have a rich history, consistent product quality, great location, and community and business support.***

They resolve conflicts between vendors, especially those related to produce resale at producer-only markets.

In short, the most successful markets, according to customer and vendor surveys, have active on-site managers.

### **Retention a challenge**

Farmers' markets vary in age and size but have similar strengths and challenges. Among the strengths: a rich history, consistent product quality, great

location, and community and business support. Challenges for market managers include recruiting vendors, drawing customers and enforcing rules. With so much expected, it's no wonder retaining managers is a challenge.

More than half the markets surveyed have existed for more than 15 years. However, only 1 in 6 managers has stayed with a market more than five years. Which prompts the question: What can we do to support market managers and keep markets strong?

### *Southeast Wisconsin farmers' markets*

To learn more about the role of farmers' market managers, Extension surveyed managers of markets in southeastern Wisconsin.

#### *MILWAUKEE COUNTY*

- Bradley Road Farmers' Market
- Cudahy Farmers' Market
- East Side Open Market
- East Town Market
- Fondy Food Center
- Fox Point Farmers' Market
- Greendale Open Market
- Hales Corners Harvest on the Homestead
- Milwaukee Public Market/Outdoors
- Riverwest Gardeners' Market
- Sherman Park Farmers' Market
- South Milwaukee Green Market
- South Shore Farmers' Market
- West Allis Farmers' Market
- Westtown Market on the Park

#### *RACINE COUNTY*

- Burlington Farmers' Market
- Racine Downtown Farmers' Market
- Racine Southside Farmers' Market
- Whitewater Farmers' Market
- Whitewater Mid-Week Farmers' Market

#### *KENOSHA COUNTY*

- Kenosha Harbor Market
- Kenosha Farmers' Markets

#### *WAUKESHA COUNTY*

- Brookfield Farmers' Market
- Delafield Farmers' Market
- Dousman Farmers' Market
- Menomonee Falls Farmers' Market
- Mukwonago Farmers' Market
- New Berlin Farmers' Market
- Oconomowoc Farmers' Market
- Waukesha Farmers' Market

# Strengthening markets: Next steps

**D**evelop the skills and knowledge of farmers' market managers, vendors and customers through education. That's the goal of UW-Extension's food coalition team in Kenosha, Milwaukee, Racine and Waukesha Counties.

Achieving that goal will ultimately lead to the success and sustainability of farmers' markets in southeastern Wisconsin. To reach that benchmark, and using our survey results as a guide, we plan to take the following steps:

- Create educational opportunities for market managers to acquire and develop skills that improve their ability to manage efficiently and well.
- Help with organizational needs, such as developing business and marketing plans, and creating promotional materials and websites.
- Help farmers' market vendors sharpen their marketing skills and make the most of sales opportunities, through UW-Extension workshops.
- Offer networking and mentoring opportunities for market managers.
- Working through vendors and market managers, educate customers about product availability and how to preserve products.



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## Workshop features top market managers

To help farmers' market managers hone their skills, UW-Extension educators held a one-day workshop featuring representatives of booming farmers' markets in Chicago and Cleveland.

Dennis Ryan of Chicago's Green City Market delivered a talk called, "A Market with a Mission: a Case Study," a management success story.

Ryan also showed participants how a friends-of-the-market group can turn a struggling market into a thriving one.

Donita Anderson, execu-

tive director of the North Union Farmers' Market, a nonprofit that runs and promotes farmers' markets in the Cleveland area, spoke about strategies to promote and publicize farmers' markets.

Other sessions featured Lisa Kingery, manager of the Fondy Farmers' Market, and Bobbi Harvey, manager of the Brookfield Farmers' Market, talking about farmers' market programming and activities.

The conference also included networking and small- and large-group discussions.

***Rain or shine, UW-Extension educators are working hard to build a network of healthy farmers' markets through:***

- ***workshops that teach marketing, promotion, pricing and signage skills;***
- ***networking and mentoring opportunities; and***
- ***other educational activities.***



*UW-Extension educators conducted a series of surveys – of vendors, customers and market managers – over the past two years to discover what makes farmers’ markets in southeastern Wisconsin tick.*



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## *Surveys part of larger effort*

*Farmers’ market surveys make up just one part of a statewide effort to grow local agricultural businesses. UW-Extension partners with other groups to promote local agriculture in many ways, including:*

### **Farm Fresh Atlas of Southeastern Wisconsin**

[www.farmfreshatlas.org/southeast/](http://www.farmfreshatlas.org/southeast/)

*...your link to local farm products, including fruits, vegetables, meats, eggs, cheeses and more. You can find nearby farmers and farmers’ markets by picking up an atlas or visiting the website.*

### **SavorWisconsin.com**

*... your on-line resource for farm-fresh products and locally made food. This site lists farmers’ markets, as well as agricultural producers and events, across the state.*

*University of Wisconsin-Extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin Counties cooperating. UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA.*

*TO LEARN MORE about UW-Extension’s farmers’ market surveys, contact Waukesha County UW-Extension Commercial Horticulture Educator Kristin Krokowski at [kristin.krokowski@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:kristin.krokowski@ces.uwex.edu) or 262/548-7775, or Rose Skora, UW-Extension Agriculture Educator for Racine and Kenosha counties, [rose.skora@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:rose.skora@ces.uwex.edu) or 262/886-8464 (Racine) or 262/857-1945 (Kenosha).*