Farmers markets are temporary retail establishments typically held outdoors, where farmers come to sell their produce at a specified place and time. Farmers markets are growing in popularity across the country and can be a good entry-level selling place for beginning farmers.

Advantages

- You may receive more money per unit, since you sell directly to customers.
- You generally have flexibility in the variety and volume of products you take to market.
- No standard pack or grade is required, but your produce should be good quality.
- Direct contact allows you to find out what your customers want.
- You have the opportunity to build a loyal customer base, including local chefs.

Considerations

- The volume of sales will vary with the popularity of the market. Think about how to incorporate deliveries to other outlets in the area to increase your sales and efficiency.
- Labor costs can be relatively high (time and travel to and from market, time away from the farm).
- If you sell at several farmers markets, schedules can be demanding.
- To sell at popular farmers markets, it helps to have unique products.
- Being successful requires positive interactions with the public.
- Most farmers markets have an application process and rules to participate. For example, in California you must register as a “certified grower” with the county agriculture commissioner before selling at a certified farmers market.
Tips for Selling at Farmers Markets

- Have an attractive product mix and clear signs for your market stand.
  - Ensure that you have a consistent supply of popular products.
  - Consider providing samples of your product if local regulations permit.
  - Set up a service system where customers do not have to wait too long in line.
  - Invest in a scale that not only calculates weight but also gives you the sales price. A calculator that prints on a paper tape is another useful tool.
  - Visit markets seasonally to figure out what’s missing from your market that you could supply.
  - Extend your season for popular products before or after the main season.
  This can increase your sales and attract new customers to your market stand.

Key Questions to Ask Yourself

- Do I enjoy working with the public? If not, can I hire someone friendly and competent for my booth?
- Where are the nearest farmers markets? Are they accepting new vendors?
- Do these farmers markets have enough customers to make it profitable for new vendors?
- What are the other vendors selling? What’s my niche?
- How much time will I spend at the market? How early will my day start and end? Am I willing to do this each week?
- What is the application process for the farmers market? What are the rules? For example, can I sell products I have not grown?

Resources

- ATTRA Publications
  Prices vary for individual publications. Many are free. An inexpensive subscription will give you access to all 350+ publications and databases. www.attra.ncat.org
  - Scheduling Vegetable Plantings for Continuous Harvest (2008)
  - Season Extension Techniques for Market Gardeners (2005)
  - Postharvest Handling of Fruits and Vegetables (2000)
- Find a Farmers Market by searching the USDA’s online directory: http://apps.ams.usda.gov/FarmersMarkets
- Growing For Market magazine offers the free issue, “Selling at Farmers Markets:” www.growingformarket.com/categories/SellingAtFarmersMarkets
- Local Harvest website is a nationwide directory of small farms, farmers markets, and other local food sources. The site helps consumers buy what they want directly from the farmers and ranchers who produce it. www.localharvest.org

Photo: Rex Dufour, NCAT

This tip sheet was developed with assistance from Dina Izzo, Bludog Organic Produce Services.