



MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Local Self-Reliance: Inner City Farmers Markets

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By the MOTHER EARTH NEWS editors



Inner city farmers markets have been a success for both farmers and consumers.
PHOTO: MANGOSTOCK/FOTOLIA

Each summer, a growing number of farmers' markets prove that city and country folks *can* work together for their mutual benefit.

This year in Hartford, Connecticut, for example, 20 farmers will—during two "market days" each week—sell locally grown produce to about 2,500 urban customers. The Connecticut market is just the first phase of an overall plan to make that region more agriculturally self-sufficient in a project that will—in the future—bring about community gardens, solar greenhouses, buying clubs, and a downtown canning business.

Hartford's success is only the latest example of what are now scores of flourishing inner-city farmers' markets. In a spring 1978 survey of fewer than 50 such outlets around the country, the Agricultural Marketing Project found out that over 8,000 farmers provided income for themselves and fresh produce for almost a quarter million city residents.

Farm Savers

Aside from the above benefits, however, such fresh produce stands help preserve the rapidly dwindling agricultural land around urban areas. (The Mid-Hudson region near New York City, for example, lost nearly half a million acres—or over 32 percent of its farms—between 1950 and 1964.)

Today, New York's Greenmarket helps food growers fight the battle against encroaching development. With eight locations in Manhattan and Brooklyn, this outlet is one of the nation's largest and most successful farmers' markets. In fact, the fresh farm goods sold there are such big draws that recent additions to the Greenmarket chain have been sponsored by local business associations which hope to profit from the numbers of people who are attracted by homegrown fruits and vegetables.

Besides making good economic sense, local produce outlets also promote good health. While most markets don't *require* organically grown produce, the system naturally attracts "small" farmers who tend to be interested in healthy, pesticide-free crops. Markets which have operated for several summers find that their customers become increasingly aware of the value of good, natural fruits and vegetables.

Neighborhood food fairs can be run (depending on the size of the operation) either by a handful of volunteers with almost no money at all or by full-time staffs with budgets of thousands of dollars. According to the Agricultural Marketing Project survey, about half of the urban farmers' markets rely on government help to meet operating expenses. This aid usually takes the form of staff members employed through the federal CETA program and grants from either the federal Community Services Administration or state and local governments. A good 50% of the outlets surveyed also charge a fee to participating farmers, while about 25% charge a fee to their *customers*. Churches and foundations are other commonly used sources of support. Still, almost three-fourths of those farmers' markets contacted by the pollsters rely to some extent on that ever-present American resource: volunteer labor.

Reliability and Location

To start a successful farmers' market, it's necessary to allow enough time to find the right site and to locate and contact reliable farmers. Greenmarket organizer Barry Benepe says that it takes roughly eight months to lay this sort of groundwork, which means that if a group wants to open a summer market, it should begin to work on the project in November.

"Access to the location—by foot *and* public transportation—is the most important consideration when you choose a site," Benepe says, "and you must constantly keep up personal contacts with local farmers to insure quality produce and eliminate any schedule hassles."

A number of groups have published reports on successful farmers' markets. The Agricultural Marketing Project, for example, offers *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Food Fairs* for \$5, and will send a copy of their farmers' market survey at no cost. Greenmarket offers a 24-page booklet that details its operation, while World Hunger Year has a list of 20 markets complete with helpful details about how each operation is run. In addition to these, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture offers a free booklet called *How a Parking Lot Became a Successful Farmers' Market*.

Congress also has under consideration a bill which will provide more federal funds for these fresh produce businesses. Staff members at the Agricultural Marketing Project report that the bill originally provided direct

grants to community groups that wanted to start their own farmers' markets. A recent Congressional committee report, however, recommends that all funds be channeled through state agricultural offices and county extension services.

For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's admirable efforts ... which is why we've made this "what's happening where" report by ILSR staffers one of MOTHER EARTH NEWS' regular features.