

Selling Local Foods in Missouri



Customer Service

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UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI



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Preface

Selling Local Foods in Missouri

Selling is as important to fruit and vegetable growers as a high yield. Producing fruits and vegetable crops is often relatively easy, but finding a market or optimal combination of markets can be challenging. Low transportation costs and the ability to produce vine-ripe, fresh fruits and vegetables give Missouri growers a competitive advantage in marketing many types of vegetables. Season-extending technology, such as high tunnels, can expand the growing and marketing windows of many Missouri-grown fruits and vegetables. Missouri growers can grow varieties and types of fruits and vegetables that cannot be found on the average supermarket shelf.

Many market outlets are available to Missouri growers. These include community farmers' markets, "u-pick" (pick-your-own) sales, on-farm or roadside markets, wholesale produce auctions, restaurants, institutional sales, marketing cooperatives, supermarket sales and community-supported agriculture or subscription farming.

Selling Local Foods provides beginning growers, and existing growers that would like to diversify, with general information and tools to make important production and business decisions. Selling Local Foods will help you make informed decisions regarding new crops, diversifying your current operation, or adding value added products, and help you determine the best venue for selling your local crop.

Selling Local Foods puts you in the fast lane for success as a commercial producer. So be sure to take the first four modules, since these offer you a solid foundation for your dreams and plans of becoming a commercial grower.

Here's what they offer:

- 90 minutes will fly by in our *Business Planning, Budgets and Liability* module. Business planning provides information and resources for anyone in or considering commercial production. You'll also get hands on experience writing your business mission statement, business plan and goals.
- *Food Safety and Food Label Claims* functions hand-in-hand with *Produce Care and Management*. Food Safety is a fast-paced, 90-minute session that will cover best food safety practices from your field to market. Produce Care spends a quick 30 minutes providing details and resources to make sure your production efforts arrive at market in top form to command the best price! You must get these two modules so you can navigate regulations and deliver the freshest and safest products to your customers.
- If you sell direct-to-consumer, through a distributor, have a farm stand, or sell through any other venue, *Customer Service and Merchandizing* offers a wealth of customer service and marketing tips and resources in this 45-minute module. Communication and relationships are key – no matter where you sell.

Did you know: research has proven that selling through multiple venues is the No. 1 key to profits for most successful local market growers? So we offer you nine, 30-minute modules, each providing an overview of different sales venues. These modules will guide you through the ins and outs of selling -- from Amish and Mennonite produce auctions to agritourism and farm stands. Take advantage of as many modules as you can; they will help you make informed decisions and choose sales venues to put money in your pocket, right from the start.

Our sales venue modules include:

- *Selling at Farmers' Markets*—Have you dreamed about one day selling at a farmers' market? Come to this session to learn about the advantages, and yes, disadvantages of selling at a farmers' market. We'll provide you with information you need to decide if selling at a farmers' market is right for you.
- *Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)*—Why do a CSA? What are some of the common misconceptions regarding CSAs? Did you know there are multiple CSA business models, and advantages and disadvantages related to each? After you complete this module you'll know ways target, develop, grow and retain your CSA customers.
- *Produce Auctions*—How did produce auctions get started? How many auctions are in Missouri? Who do I contact? What are their regulations? Facilities? Come learn about

the many facets of selling at a produce auction. Find out how an auction might be a great venue for your products.

- *Selling to Institutions*—What is an institution? There are more kinds than you might think. In this module you'll discover how to get your foot in the door and the benefits of partnering with different types of institutions. You'll discover how selling to an institution can foster community relationships and open the door to a variety of other marketing channels.
- *Selling to Restaurants*—Our Selling to Restaurants module will describe all of the benefits and unique opportunities associated with selling to restaurants. You'll hear directly from chefs what is important to them and how to get started. We'll include some key resources to make planning and communicating with chefs just that much easier.
- *Selling to Grocery Stores*—This session will provide you with some key tips for selling to grocery stores. This module will dive into the specific topics you need to consider if you sell to grocers including producer-retailer relationships, pricing, packaging, quality, and quantity.
- *Selling Wholesale/Food Hubs*—Learn about the different types of wholesalers and the advantages of marketing through distributors. We'll explain food hub classifications and identify potential challenges you might face when selling to wholesalers so that you are prepared. Wholesale appeals to many farmers because it allows you to focus on what you're good at - production.
- *Kitchens and Other Local Foods*— Did you know that the percentage of meat in a product determines which regulations you need to follow? This module will detail the ins and outs of regulations for jams and jellies to pasta and eggs, meat and jerky. While many farmers think of local foods as produce, you will find that there are other products that you can sell locally.
- *Agritourism, Farm Stands and U-Pick*—This session will explore the crossover between agriculture and tourism industries. You will learn about key ways you can adapt your farm and growing practices so that you can participate in the agritourism industry through u-picks, farm stands, and events.

Don't get surprised by the unexpected. Learn, plan and be proactive to ensure your success whatever sales venues you choose.

Selling Local Foods In Missouri Customer Service



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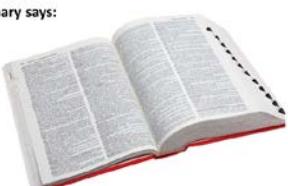
Welcome to the Customer Service chapter of the Selling Local Foods course. As you have learned, the market for fresh, local produce has been growing rapidly. Customers want to be able to have a face-to-face conversation with their farmers or sellers and feel like they really know where their food is coming from. Customer service is essential to selling your products.

This section will provide you with insight on how to effectively engage with customers and make a great impression on behalf of your farm. You will learn:

- What customer service is and how to effectively employ it in a way that will increase your sales and customer base
- Ways to find interested potential customers and how to ensure them that they should go through with their purchase
- How to plan ahead and be prepared at your market
- How to get and keep a loyal group of customers

What is customer service?

The dictionary says:



Customer service is a very complex set of actions that are essential to maintaining a successful business. The dictionary defines this term as “recognizing a need, building rapport with your customer and being a reliable source that is responsive to that need.” This is true, but we’d like to dig a little deeper and break down what customer service means specifically in terms of selling local food.

A more detailed version



The assistance and advice provided by a company to those people who buy or use its products or services.

High quality customer service is about knowing and understanding your customers. Engage with people who show interest in your products and listen to identify any unmet needs that they may have. Always be thinking about ways to fill these unmet needs. If you do this correctly, it will result in lasting relationships with current and potential customers. By being friendly and outgoing, people will be more receptive to you, your brand and your products.

What are ways you provide customer service?

- Conversation
- Providing quality products
- Understanding needs
- Responding to needs
- Making them HAPPY!



There are many ways to provide good customer service. It starts on your farm with the actual care of your produce and it extends beyond purchases to maintain a network of loyal customers. Ways that you can provide excellent customer service are through:

- Conversation
- Providing quality products
- Understanding needs
- Responding to needs
- Making the customer HAPPY!

Picture it

You're working your booth at market on a Saturday.
How are you going to attract customers and close the sale?
How do you spot and "active shopper"?



You are selling at market. Everyone there has come with the specific intent to purchase local food and therefore everyone is a potential customer. How do you engage customers to make a sale? Keep in mind, you want to be making substantial sales. You shouldn't be looking to sell just one tomato. Instead, you should aim to sell out of tomatoes completely. It is pivotal that you engage with customers so you can take those potential \$2 sales and bring them up into the double digits.

Ways to spot an active shopper

- Are they touching your product?
- Are they asking questions?
- What are they wearing or carrying?
- Don't hide behind a table or display.



Spotting active shoppers is a key to increasing sales. While you are standing at your booth, you need to be looking out for something called "buying signals." Notice if people pick up a certain product or ask you a question about pricing. These actions show that they are considering spending money at your booth today. Once you notice these people, you need to engage with them. You can do so by offering them a sample or a fact about the product they have shown interest in. It is important not to hide behind your display because the customer could lose interest. If you walk up to the potential customer and strike up a conversation about recipes that involve that product, they are more likely to buy it than if you say nothing at all. It's important that you approach these situations in a very organic and personal

way. Don't ever ask "What are you looking for?" You should never make a customer feel like you expect them to spend their money on you. You have to earn it through great customer service!

Are you prepared?

1. **Product quality**
Is your product fresh, clean and ready for sale? Are samples prepared?
2. **Price**
Is your product priced fairly and competitively? Is your price list accurate and up-to-date?
3. **Display**
Is your display neat, accessible and attractive? Are prices clearly marked? Is the name of your farm displayed on boxes, banners or signs?

Many local food sellers know the saying "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." There are many things that need to be considered in order to have a successful day of selling. By preparing for a day at market, you make shopping more convenient for your customers.

Quality: In this curriculum we will have the opportunity to learn more about food safety and handling practices. Having clean and high quality product will help build consumer confidence and increase shelf life which in the long run will help you have higher returns. If you are having such a good day that you run out of top quality and have to send some of your less attractive products, be transparent with the customer. Let them know why they look that way (i.e. a hail storm) and offer them at a discounted price.

Price: Make sure that your prices are accurate and up-to-date. They shouldn't be the highest at the market, but they also shouldn't be the lowest. You are the only one who knows your business and your expenses. Price your product according to its quality so that you can turn a reasonable profit. Also, remember to clearly mark prices on your product. If people have to ask you how much something costs, they are less likely to buy it.

Display: It's very important to show abundance when selling at market. There is a term "pile it high and watch it fly". If you're stall has an abundance of quality product, potential customers will be more likely to come make a purchase from you. Make sure to utilize vertical spacing by stacking your products on top of each other. You also want to make sure that the signage for your farm is clearly legible to those passing by. It's important to think of your market stand as a temporary store front. It looks very nice and organized as it is a reflection of your overall brand.

Are you prepared?

4. Supplies

Do you have plenty of shopping bags. Do you have enough cash to make change? Is your scale in good working order? Are farm pamphlets and recipes available?

5. Personal appearance

Are you clean, neat, well dressed and well groomed?

6. Attitude

Are you proud of your products and what you do for a living?

Supplies: Never go to the market empty handed. Make sure you have adequate change handy. Expect customers to have larger bills around the first and third weeks of the month as those correspond to pay days. Also, if you price your products in whole numbers, it will be easier to make fast change which will help you and your employees. This will also help to keep any lines moving at a steady pace which will encourage purchases. You should also consider bringing promotional materials such as a flier for your farm. A nice tactic would be to print out recipe cards with your signage on them and slip them into your customers' bags as they check out.

Personal Appearance: Remember that you are an extension of your brand. Make sure that you are clean and well-groomed when you are selling at market. If you are going to wear a hat, make sure that it has been washed. You also must have clean hands and fingernails. This is partially about appearance but it also plays into concerns about food safety which we covered in section 3. It would also be nice if all of the sellers were wearing shirts that said the name of your farm. This will help customers identify who they are talking to.

Attitude: Having a bad day? Has it been a long week? Are you frustrated with how your growing season is going? When you're at market, that doesn't matter! As we have said, customer service is about maintaining relationships. You need to be excited to see your customers and enthusiastic about fulfilling their needs. Put your game face on and let your other troubles stay home.

How to keep them engaged

RULE #1: KNOW YOUR PRODUCT!

Ask open ended questions that are specific.

- Have you ever tried?
- Have you ever shopped with us before?
- Do you like?
- Did you know?
- Would you ever?

The first rule for customer engagement is that you must know your product. Yes, you should make a personal connection with your customers and can talk about a variety of friendly topics but your main role is to help them better understand how your product will make their life better. You should be able to talk about when your product was picked, if pesticides were applied, the growing seasons in your region and why certain products need to be purchased now. A lot of the people are going to be generations removed from their family farms. They will be depending on you for information about agriculture and how the farming process works. Being able to provide this information is very important. But don't spend all of your time talking at the

customer. Try to figure out what they are specifically in the market for.

Ask them specific but open ended questions. If you walk up to a customer and say, "You have such a familiar face, have you shopped here before?" this will open up a dialogue. If they have shopped with you before, you can discuss what products they liked and make recommendations for this week's selection. If they have not, you have an excuse to tell them all about your business and why your products are top quality. Above all, don't forget to be passionate! This is your life's work. You know what you are talking about and you believe in your product. Let that be reflected in your conversations with potential customers.

Non Verbal Communication

- Sustain eye contact with customers when serving them or having a conversation with them. Avoid shifting your eyes too much, or looking down or away from customers.
- Keep hands and elbows away from your body. When listening to customers, nod your head and smile. Avoid fidgeting, handwrapping and touching your face.

Non-verbal communication is anything you do with your body while engaging with others that sends a message. This type of communication really sets the tone of your interaction. If you are telling a customer that your carrots are the best on the planet but you have your arms crossed and are looking at the ground, this message won't seem authentic. Keep eye contact with customers while you are talking to them. This will make things more comfortable and will also help you to remember one another's faces which will come in handy when you are trying to sell to them next time. You need to avoid closed-body language such as keeping your hands and elbows in tight to your body. This sends the message that you are indifferent to conversation. It is important not to be fidgety. While you don't want your hands glued to your sides, you also don't want to be moving around restlessly and touching your face.

Non Verbal Communication



- Keep an open and relaxed posture. Lean forward slightly. Avoid crossing your arms and standing rigidly.
- Speak at an appropriate volume and rate. Vary your pitch. Avoid speaking in a monotone, using too many pauses and "ahs," and repeating words.

Leaning into conversations helps you to look genuine and engaged. These conversations are exactly that, conversations. They shouldn't be too scripted. Even if you have worked on your pitch for years, it's okay to change it up. Engaging your customer should be a two-sided interaction. You don't need to yell or speed through your pitch and then move onto the next customer. Just talk to them. Find out what they want from you and then tell them how you can give it to them. Remember to relax. The selling will happen naturally if you just focus on connecting with your customers.

How can you make it an experience?

- Educating the customer about the product.
- Showing passion about your product
- Showing personal preference for your goods.
- Is it peak season for an item?
- Hands on experience:
 - Touch it, taste it, see it, do it



Each time you go to market, one of your goals is of course to sell a certain amount of your product. However, you also need to be thinking about how you can increase your amount of loyal customers. One way to do this is to make sure that shopping with you is more than just buying a product, it should be an experience. If you do everything that we've discussed in this lesson, you will be able to do this effectively. Remember that you are the expert on your product. You get to stand next to a customer in front of your product and tell them all of the reasons why they should buy it. This type of access is invaluable.

If you succeed at creating a really positive experience for your customers, they will be more likely to come back again. Make sure to tell your customers if you will be offering new products in the coming weeks. I mentioned earlier that you should be able to give your customers information about growing seasons. This is going to be really helpful because if your customer asks for strawberries and you don't have any, instead of simply saying "no" you can say, "no, sorry, it's not the proper growing season for strawberries. If you come back in three weeks we should have them then, though!" This makes you seem very knowledgeable about your products. It also makes you seem like you are committed to providing the freshest and most top quality produce possible. If you simply say "no" you might sound unprepared and even lazy which is not true! Be transparent with your customers!

Are you social?

- **Farm pamphlet or brochure**
Include pictures, a farm history, a statement of your farming philosophy, products, and a harvest calendar.
- **Weekly or monthly newsletter**
This is a great way to update customers about new products and developments on your farm. Include seasonal recipes, along with food storage and preservation tips.

Selling isn't just about helping customers at market. You need to figure out how to get your customers there in the first place! One way to do this is by creating a pamphlet about your farm to give to customers. Make it detailed. Include photos and information about your farm. This will help customers to feel like they really know you and will make them more likely to come back for more of your great product. You can also create a newsletter. You can have people share their emails at your booth and then send out an email about what you'll be selling at your next market appearance. This will help people to remember you and choose to buy from your farm instead of someone else's or even a grocery store.

Are you social?

- **Recipes**

Consider handing out a range of topics such as nutrition, cooking, storage and preservation tips, classes, events, contests, history and origins of select food crops, relevant to your farm and products.

- **Website**

Take your farm to the Internet and combine all of the options above in one place. However, having a dysfunctional website or failing to promptly respond to web requests may be worse than having no website at all. If needed, seek help from a professional web designer or web manager.

Recipes are a great way to promote your product. Many times people will see an item and want to buy it but they will hesitate because they aren't sure how to prepare it. If you create recipes with your farm signage on them and hand them out to people at your stall, they will be able to see exactly how to use the products you have on display and will be more likely to make a purchase.

Lastly, you should have an updated website. This will allow people to learn more about you and is another outlet that you can use to share information about what you are currently harvesting. In addition, you should maintain a couple of social media profiles so that you can engage with your potential customers.

Your Brand

- Are you creating a positive image for your farm?
- Name recognition
- What's your mission?
- You are what you act like.



When you are at market, don't think of yourself as the seller of your products, consider yourself an integral extension of your brand. All of the things we've discussed throughout this section will help you add value to your brand. The goal is for someone to see the logo of your farm and think, "That's a great place to buy produce." You can create these associations by producing quality products, having a clearly defined mission and being friendly and knowledgeable as the face of your brand. Above all, your messaging should be open and honest. If you combine all of these elements together, your sales should increase as you establish a broader network of loyal customers.

How to lose your customers



- Vendor takes or makes cell phone calls while serving customers.
- Vendor chats a long while with other vendors or customers who have been helped while others are waiting.
- Long line has formed at the vendor's stand — most customers won't wait.
- Vendor fails to acknowledge waiting customers.
- Vendor cannot make change.

We've talked about identifying active shoppers and how to engage them. Another thing you need to think about is how to remain appealing to those customers that might be inclined to walk by your stall if conditions aren't exactly right. You can avoid this by being attentive the whole time you are at market. Do not take calls during your shift or take breaks while standing near your display. This is confusing to the customer and sends a message that you have other priorities beyond them. Of course, you have a million things to consider while running a business but when you are at market you need to think of yourself as a seller first. Stand with good posture and warmly welcome all potential customers. Make sure to be conversational with customers but also focus on keeping the line on the short side so as not to discourage passersby from shopping with you. Tactics to accomplish this include handing out recipe cards so people know how to prepare your products without having to

individually explain it and having proper change.

If a customer comes to you with a complaint, listen to them and offer a solution. Sometimes this will mean offering them a replacement of a product at no cost to them. In the long run, it is cheaper to keep an old customer than it is to gain a new one. Stay loyal to the people who continually come back each week to support you. Try to behave like someone you would buy from if the roles were flipped and you were the customer.



This is who you don't want to be. If any of this looks familiar to you, think about changes you could make to increase sales at your market? Some of the smallest changes don't cost money. Consider changing your layout or providing more information to the customer in person. Remember that they look to you as the absolute expert on your product, as you should be!



This is a great illustration of a market farmer ready for business. He has arrived on time, is properly dressed and ready for business. Notice how he is being completely attentive to the needs of that customer by offering her and her son samples. However, he also has recipe cards ready and is set up to make quick transactions should more customers arrive. Are you like him?

Always end on a positive note!

It's cheaper to keep a customer than to gain new ones.

Customer service can make or break your business. Prompt response to concerns, honest communication and open relationships with customers will help you earn more money and win in the long run.

Glossary of Terms

Acidified canned food	A food whose ingredients are primarily naturally not acidic ($\text{pH} > 4.6$) that are acidified with vinegar or lemon juice before canning. This includes pickled vegetables and other products. To sell these products at room temperature, a process review and attendance at Better Process Control School is required.
Better Process Control School (BPCS)	Better Process Control School is required for selling some shelf stable canned foods. The course either includes two days (only for acidified foods) or four days (for selling low acid canned foods).
Clean	The removal of dirt and debris.
Commercial kitchen	Typically, this is a food processing facility that uses commercial-size equipment for preparing food and is typically not a home kitchen used for regular family use. Note that if a processor needs a food safety license to sell a particular food, they need to obtain such license for themselves, even if someone else using the same facility has a license, unless that person is willing to take on the liability for another processor.
Co-packer	A contracted processing facility that manufactures and packages food products for a client based on the client specifications.
Crisping	Refreshing harvested fresh produce in water or sprinkling leafy commodities with water or ice to restore moisture content.
Farmers' Market	RSMo. 144.527.2 defines a farmers' market as "Individual farmers or a cooperative or nonprofit enterprise or association that consistently occupies a given site throughout the season, which operates principally as a common marketplace for an individual farmer or a group of farmers to sell farm products directly to consumers, and where the products sold are produced by the participating farmers with the sole intent and purpose of generating a portion of household income."
Under this definition farmers' markets include but may not be limited to:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One or more producers at any location• Roadside farm stands or farmers selling directly from their home• Community Supported Agriculture (CSA's)• Agritourism operations• Any operation where farmers sell farm products from their farms directly to consumers with a logical pattern• Both the act of organization or assembly and the individual participants may be considered farmers' markets.	

It is important to recognize the separation between markets as a common marketplace and markets as individuals and entities. The laws and

	regulations governing a farmers' market as a common marketplace are determined by the market's organizational structure and the activities the market (organizing body) performs under applicable state and local laws. The laws governing vendors are determined by their legal incorporation and the types of products and services they provide under applicable state and local laws, whether they qualify as a farmers' market themselves or not.
FDA	The United States Food and Drug Administration. Generally, responsible for regulating all food products other than meat and poultry.
Food Hub	A centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products.
Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)	A law signed in January 2011. It includes final rules released in 2015 on produce safety, as well as processed food safety. This is the first time that there have been governmental regulatory requirements for selling fresh, whole produce. More information is available from http://missourifamilies.org/foodsafety/newsletters/ or www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/FSMA/default.htm
fresh-cut	"...any fresh fruit, vegetable or combination that has been physically altered from its original form, but remains in a fresh state."
GAPs	Good Agriculture Practices. For the purposes of USDA's GAPs program, GAPs applies to produce growing, harvest, packing, and transportation. If a product is GAP certified, the grower has passed an audit that they are using good food safety produce growing practices. Note that GAPs is not a regulatory requirement, but may be required by a buyer.
GFSI	The Global Food Safety Initiative. Some buyers may request that producers pass one of the GFSI- recognized 3 rd party audits for food safety. Some of the auditing schemes recognized by GFSI include Primus and Safe Quality Food (SQF).
GMPs	Good Manufacturing Practices- the basic sanitary and processing requirements necessary to ensure the production of safe food. Implementing these is essential to meeting FDA and USDA food safety requirements.
Grocery Store	A market outlet for distribution of local food products for retail sale to consumers.
Group GAPs	A USDA food safety certification program which officially began April 3, 2016. Under the program, growers of any size can be USDA-GAP certified as a group.
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points. A HACCP plan and implementation program is a regulatory requirement for meat and poultry

	products, seafood, some juice, some vacuum-packed products, and by some food buyers.
High acid canned food	The natural pH of the product is ≤ 4.6 . This includes most fruits and naturally fermented foods. No process review is required but pH records must be kept.
Hydro-Cooling	When warm produce is cooled directly by chilled water, the process is known as hydro-cooling.
Incubator kitchen	A kitchen facility that can be utilized by start-up or other food businesses. May also be considered a “community” or “shared-use” kitchen. Note that generally, if a food product requires a food safety license to sell, the processor would still need to obtain such license for themselves, even if someone else using the facility has a license, unless that person is willing to take on the liability for another processor.
Local	There is currently no uniform national definition for this term. However, if the term is used, it must be truthful and not misleading. The 2008 Farm Act defined this term as < 400 miles from the origin.
Low acid canned food	A food product that has a natural pH of greater than 4.6. This would include canned vegetables and meats packed in water. To sell these products at room temperature, a process review, attendance at Better Process Control School, and commercial retort canning are required.
Natural	USDA defines “natural” related to how a meat product was processed, stating that it is “minimally processed and contains no artificial ingredients.” FDA does not currently have a definition for natural. However, FDA “has not objected to the use of the term if the food does not contain added color, artificial flavors, or synthetic substances.”
Organic	For any food product to be labeled as “certified organic” or “USDA Organic,” they must be certified to meet all the requirements of the <u>USDA National Organic Program</u> .
pH	A measure of the acidity of a food product, which has a major impact on the microbial safety of the product, since some organisms do not grow well in acidic conditions.
Potentially hazardous food	Often commonly called “perishable” foods. A food that is natural or synthetic and that requires temperature control because it is in a form capable of supporting hazardous microorganisms.
Produce Auction	A market outlet for locally produced wholesale products. Fresh produce, as well as a variety of other agricultural products, are offered for sale to the highest bidder.

Restaurant	A market outlet for locally produced food to be sold and prepared for consumption by consumers.
Sanitize	Treating to reduce the amount of bacteria on a surface.
Trimming	Removing the parts of harvested fresh produce which are most likely to deteriorate. It removes the dried plant fluid that seeps out after harvesting which clog the plants pores, not allowing for proper hydration, and it removes those parts that detract from taste and eye appeal.
USDA	The United States Department of Agriculture. Generally responsible for regulating meat and poultry products and also perform other roles supporting agriculture, such as conducting Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) audits.
Water activity	Water activity is a measurement of the water available for the growth of microorganisms in a food product. It is affected by moisture content, as well as salt and sugar content of the product. It ranges from 0 to 1 (distilled water is a w_1).

Marketing Vegetables in Missouri



Figure 1. Farmers markets provide an easy, convenient way for producers to interact with people interested in fresh, local fruits and vegetables.

Marketing is as important to vegetable growers as a high yield. Producing vegetable crops is often relatively easy, but finding a market or optimal combination of markets can be challenging. Low transportation costs and the ability to produce vine-ripe, fresh vegetables give Missouri vegetable growers a competitive advantage in marketing many types of vegetables. Season-extending technology, such as high tunnels, can expand the growing and marketing windows of many Missouri-grown vegetables. Missouri vegetable growers can grow varieties and types of vegetables that cannot be found on the average supermarket shelf.

Many market outlets are available to Missouri vegetable growers. These include community farmers markets, "u-pick" (pick-your-own) sales, on-farm or roadside markets, wholesale produce auctions, restaurants, institutional sales, marketing cooperatives, supermarket sales and community-supported agriculture or subscription farming.

When choosing suitable market outlets, consider factors such as the volume of produce you will be growing; the time you have available for marketing during the growing season; your willingness, time and ability to deal with customers directly; the perishability of your crops; price levels and price stability of the market; and barriers to market entry and expansion.

Revised by
David H. Trinklein, Horticulture State Specialist, Division of Plant Sciences

Farmers markets

Farmers markets are excellent outlets for directly marketing fresh, local produce to people in the community. Farmers markets support local farmers and promote healthy eating habits while fostering community development. Farmers markets are an excellent way for consumers to connect with food providers. By interacting with growers, consumers learn how food is grown, discover new types of vegetables and even learn how the vegetables can be prepared to preserve their nutritional value. Most consumers shop at farmers markets for freshness, diversity and the opportunity to support local farmers.

Farmers markets are well suited to small, individual lots of mixed produce. Strict grading and packaging of produce are not required, and items grade two or lower can often be sold with ease. Farmers markets are relatively easy markets to access and do not require a significant amount of startup capital. Most farmers markets require vendors to grow their products within a certain distance from the market and will often have rules and regulations governing how the items are sold. A space or booth rental fee may be required to sell at the market. Most farmers markets are centrally located, open-air markets within a community, so advertising by grower-vendors is not necessary. Farmers markets are compatible with off-farm employment because most market days occur on evenings or weekends.

Because farmers markets are well suited to small volumes of produce, they may not be the sole market outlet for a large-scale vegetable grower. Obtaining a premium price for produce at a farmers market may be difficult if there is



Figure 2. Pick-your-own marketing works best with crops for which it is easy to identify harvest maturity.

competition for the same item. Farmers markets are usually seasonal and transient, often opening in April and closing by November. However, covered farmers markets may be available year-round. Farmers markets require a significant amount of time for marketing the produce and may not be an efficient use of time for all growers. Missouri has more than 100 community farmers markets. To find a farmers market in your area, consult the Missouri Farmers Market Association.

U-pick marketing

U-pick, or pick-your-own, marketing is popular for vegetables such as asparagus, green beans, peas, sweet corn, pumpkins and tomatoes (Figure 2). Most growers use u-pick to market vegetables for which pickers can easily recognize harvest maturity. Some growers open fields at the end of the harvest season to u-pick customers to clean up the fields.

U-pick marketing of vegetables is not capital-intensive and works well for perishable vegetables. U-pick lowers costs for labor, transportation, packaging and marketing but requires time for supervising customers. In sparsely populated rural areas, u-pick may not be a successful market outlet. And because the grower is inviting the public onto the farm, accident liability insurance may be required.

One of the challenges with u-pick marketing is coordinating harvest frequency with customer volume.

Advertising is essential to maintain a steady flow of customers to the farm. Consideration must be paid to parking and traffic flow on the farm. Pickers must be supervised and shown the proper way to harvest each crop to maximize marketable yield without damaging the plants.

On-farm or roadside markets

Many Missouri vegetable growers sell their produce through on-farm stores or roadside stands (Figures 3 and 4). This method works particularly well in high-traffic areas. Generally, this form of marketing is not capital-intensive and is easy to access. The on-farm store can also be used to sell a variety of products — vegetables, fruits, processed vegetables and crafts — produced on the farm or from neighboring farms.

Many roadside markets are seasonal and benefit from a steady supply of quality produce. Some roadside stands purchase produce from other growers in the region to supplement or diversify their sales volume. Operation of the stand requires labor through the season, and packaging and grading requirements are stricter than at a farmers market. Rules and regulations such as health permits, weights and measures standards, parking, sales taxes, handicap access and sanitation must be considered before starting the market. The market should be clean and neat and have a variety of produce to choose from. Roadside market prices often fluctuate during the season, based on local supply.

Grower organizations

Missouri Farmers Market Association
710 S. Hickory St.
Mt. Vernon, MO 65712
417-708-1909

Missouri Farmers Union
15593 Road 245
Langdon MO 64446
573-659-4787 or 660-787-0222

Missouri Organic Association
20547 Creek Road
Bunceton, MO 65237
660-427-5555 or 573-619-9139

Missouri Vegetable Growers Association
100 E. Newton St., 4th Floor
Versailles, MO 65084
573-378-5358

For farmers market locations, visit <http://agebb.missouri.edu/fmktdir>.

Wholesale produce auctions

Missouri has four wholesale produce auctions. A produce auction is a marketing cooperative organized as a limited liability corporation or general partnership. Each auction has shareholders, usually growers, who provide startup capital for the auction. Produce auctions allow grower-members to wholesale market large volumes of produce in a centralized facility to a diverse group of buyers. Grower-members are expected to grade and package their produce in standardized containers before the auction. Each auction has specific guidelines for grading and packaging produce items. The auction often sells containers or boxes to grower-members. Growers transport the



Figure 3. Roadside stands and on-farm stores are most successful in high-traffic areas.

produce to the auction building the morning of the auction, and the auction commences by midmorning. Growers are responsible for boxing, unloading, stacking and labeling their produce items. The auction is conducted in an open-air shed with wide floor space for loading and unloading produce. The produce can be auctioned in lots positioned on carts on the floor or in a drive-through for bulk wagons or trailers.

Each lot of produce has a card that identifies the type, quantity, grade and, sometimes, variety of vegetable or fruit in the lot. This card is the consignment sheet and is read aloud by the manager or auctioneer before auctioning the lot. Each tag has a number that identifies the grower. Each lot is systematically auctioned to the highest bidder. The auction is designed for wholesale marketing, but small lots of produce are sold at retail prices in a separate section of the auction. Since most buyers want larger volumes of produce, most auctions sell small lots — less than three boxes of any item — last.

Wholesale produce auctions bring buyers and sellers together for a short period of time, several times each week. Most buyers purchase for small supermarkets, roadside stands or restaurants. The auction does not perform any postharvest handling or store any produce, because every lot is sold regardless of price at the day of the auction. Most auctions have a "no no-sale" policy. However, some auctions choose to set a price floor or minimum acceptable price for each lot of produce. A commission of 9 to 12 percent is deducted from the sale price of each lot to fund operating costs of the auction and salaries of the market manager, clerks and other workers in the auction.

Produce auctions are an efficient market outlet for growers who don't have time to market their produce. Both top- and low-grade produce can be sold at the auction. Transaction costs are lowered because produce is transported to a central facility for market. Most produce auctions will only sell produce grown within a 100-mile radius of the auction facility. Produce grown outside the 100-mile radius is considered "shipped or imported produce" and is usually auctioned after local produce.

Wholesale produce auctions serving Missouri growers

Barton County Produce Auction LLC
669-A NW 30th Lane
Lamar, MO 64759
417-681-0123

C-Highway Produce Auction
Short State Highway P
Seymour, MO 65746
417-859-3509

Central Missouri Produce Auction Inc.
37808 Highway E
Fortuna, MO 65034
660-337-6227

Clark Produce Auction LLC
1966 Highway Y
Clark, MO 65243
660-264-4555

Four County Produce Auction
1162 NE 1400 Road
Windsor, MO 65360
660-684-6844

Highway 60 Produce Auction LLC
Seymour, MO 65746
417-935-2791

Leadmine Produce Auction
839 State Road T
Tunas, MO 65764
417-993-0086

North Missouri Produce Auction LLC
32633 State Highway F
Jamesport, MO 64648
660-684-6844

For more information about wholesale produce auctions, visit
<http://agebb.missouri.edu/hort/auction>

Growers who wish to sell produce grown more than 100 miles away should contact the market manager before bringing produce to the auction. During the peak growing season, most produce auctions have two or three sales per week. Often, special auction events are conducted for items such as flowers, bedding plants, small animals, hay or straw, and crafts. The auction system is well suited to relatively nonperishable vegetables and fruits. Given the nature of the auction system, prices can vary, but an auction with low prices is often followed by auctions with high prices. Average seasonal prices for produce at most auctions are usually above wholesale final market prices or prices received from supermarket contracts. Growers should use the auction system throughout the growing season to get the most out of the changing prices.

Marketing cooperatives

Although wholesale produce auctions are marketing cooperatives, other forms of marketing cooperatives can be established in Missouri. Growers in a region who produce similar types of vegetables or use similar growing practices, such as organic, may consider coming together to form a cooperative. A cooperative is a business organization owned by grower-members. Cooperative ventures can be organized as partnerships, corporations, cooperatives or limited liability companies. In Kansas, for instance, eight growers formed a community-supported farm that offered a wide variety of crops and served a larger number of members than could have been done by individual producers. In northeast Iowa, a small number of growers cooperatively own a packing and grading facility and a delivery truck that serves nursing homes and other institutional customers.

Cooperative marketing can offer many benefits to growers. These include specializing in vegetable crops best suited to their soil type, labor availability and management skills; marketing a larger volume of production, which reduces the marketing cost per product and allows access to new markets, such as wholesale distributors; complementing their own skills and abilities with other necessary production, grading and marketing skills; and spreading investment costs in equipment and facilities among a larger number of producers. Most wholesale market outlets desire a consistent quality and quantity of produce. The cooperative structure allows growers to sequence their planting to maintain a steady supply of produce for each market. Using a cooperative, growers are able to label and differentiate their produce. The cooperative can help with harvesting, processing, cooling or freezing, packaging, labeling and transporting produce to market. Growers market a specific quantity of produce through the cooperative relative to how much they have invested. The cooperative has a market manager who coordinates production and seeks new markets for the cooperative. With a diligent market manager and a larger volume of produce, each grower-member spends less time marketing relative to producing the crop. The cooperative can purchase input items, such as fertilizer or seed, in bulk quantities, resulting in significantly lower prices. Labor and equipment for planting and harvesting can be pooled and shared among members of the cooperative.

Depending on its size, a cooperative can have significant capital requirements, such as packing equipment, freezing units and coolers. For the cooperative to succeed, growers must work together and put aside self-interest. A marketing agreement among members that specifies the type and volume of vegetables sold by each member must be implemented. Some cooperatives do not take possession of members' produce but serve only to connect members with buyers. Quality control is essential, and the cooperative must enforce grading and packing requirements. Growers should use the cooperative as the dominant marketing outlet for their vegetables. Growers considering any form

of cooperative entity should read *The Farmer's Legal Guide to Producer Marketing Associations* by Doug O'Brien and co-authors (see the Resources section) and should seek expert legal assistance.

Community-supported agriculture

Community-supported agriculture farms (CSAs) appeared in Missouri in the mid-1990s after being imported from Europe and Japan to the Northeast in the mid-1980s. CSAs are community farms where consumers interested in healthy, safe food enter into an economic partnership with growers seeking stable markets. Consumers pay in advance for a whole season of produce with a membership fee ranging from \$300 to \$600, depending on size of share. In return, members receive a supply of six or more varieties of vegetables on a weekly basis from roughly mid-May until October.

CSAs have traditionally had core groups of consumers who take on some tasks of planning, organizing and other labor — weeding, hoeing, harvesting, marketing, distribution, coordination — in addition to the membership fee. The benefits to growers include sharing the harvest risk with members who join knowing they may receive reduced harvests or variety depending on weather conditions or other problems. Traditional CSAs excel at creating loyal customers and friends, resulting in tremendous community partnerships.

A more common form of CSA in Missouri is subscription farming, which normally eliminates the work requirement for members. These CSAs may charge an advance fee for the entire season, or growers may opt to have a nominal membership fee with weekly or monthly invoices for the market basket provided.

In either form, the greatest benefit of CSA is the financing available from upfront membership fees, which enables the grower to buy seeds, supplies and labor.

CSAs require excellent management skills. Planning is essential to provide the expected variety and quantity of crops through a 20- to 24-week season. Growing such



Figure 4. Roadside stands and on-farm stores should be clean and neat and offer a variety of produce.



Table 1. Summary of market outlets for Missouri.

Market outlet	Farmers market	Roadside market	U-pick market	Produce auction	Market cooperative	Direct store sales	CSA	Institution sales	Restaurant sales
Suitable for large volumes of produce per grower?	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Marketing time required by individual grower	High	Medium	High	Low	Low	Medium	Medium-High	Low	Medium-High
Degree of grower contact with consumers	High	High	High	Low	Low	Low	High	Low	Low
Suitable for very perishable vegetables?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Price stability	Medium	Medium	High	Low-Medium	High	High	High	High	Medium-High

a wide variety of crops — usually 60 or more different vegetables, herbs, fruits or other crops — throughout the growing season requires knowledge of different growing techniques and carefully planned planting and harvesting, in addition to extra labor. By charging weekly or monthly fees based on the market value of vegetables provided, subscription CSAs exert less pressure on growers to supply a good variety every week than traditional CSAs. Growers considering developing a CSA should have several years of vegetable farming experience and good planning skills to manage the variety of crops, planting and harvesting schedules required to produce vegetables for 20 to 24 weeks. Growers considering a traditional CSA arrangement should also be adept at managing members' labor to make the most of the member work requirement.

Some growers form cooperative CSAs with other vegetable growers or producers of eggs, meat and honey. Such arrangements allow producers to specialize in different crops that are better suited to their land assets and management skills. Cooperative partnerships can take a great deal of time to plan and manage, but much of this can be done during the offseason. CSAs in general have medium to high marketing costs but can help stabilize farm incomes, minimize risk from specific crop failures and provide outlets for extra produce. CSAs are almost always used in conjunction with wholesale outlets or farmers markets to diversify funding sources.

Restaurant and institutional sales

Selling to chefs and institutional food services can help growers diversify their markets. The most likely market targets are independently owned and operated restaurants that frequently change menus. Many are upscale restaurants that depend on high-quality ingredients to serve a sophisticated and discerning clientele. Such restaurants tend to use a limited amount of product and have little storage space on site, which means they need multiple deliveries each week. Lower-priced or high-volume restaurants can also be potential clients, particularly for highly perishable items that suffer from long shipping

distances, such as tomatoes or strawberries. With today's food trends, many chefs feel market pressure to source locally produced, high-quality products.

Benefits of marketing to chefs include a higher wholesale price if the product is delivered to the restaurant; a larger sales volume than retail sales, resulting in lower marketing costs; a market for unique and highly perishable products; and exposure for the farm's product to a wider audience, particularly if the chef uses the farm name and product in a marketing strategy.

An intangible benefit of selling to chefs is the invaluable feedback that growers get from food professionals, who may recommend earlier harvesting or different postharvest handling or packaging. To sell to chefs, growers need to have good postharvest handling and sorting, grading and packaging capacity. Growers will also need to be able to provide a standard business invoice that can be entered into the restaurant's accounting system and, in most cases, cannot expect payment upon delivery. (The exception is if growers can receive credit card payments. Setting up such a system can have multiple advantages in working with large-volume customers.) Growers should also consider that chefs have a schedule almost opposite their own — chefs finish cleanup from dinner service after midnight — which means farmers need to be able to accept orders by email, fax or, as a last resort, an answering machine. Growers should also be able to provide advance product price lists and availability on a weekly basis.

A great way to break into restaurant sales is to offer chefs samples of products to find out if your products are high enough quality for them to use. Chefs expect products they order to be delivered as promised and need to know about crop shortages far enough in advance to order replacement products from other distributors. Never deliver to a chef during lunch or dinner service (11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 10 p.m., respectively) or you are likely to lose the sale because of the inconvenience to the chef.

Another potential marketing outlet is institutional food services, such as campus dining, elementary and secondary school cafeterias, hospitals and nursing homes. Many of the benefits and rules about selling to chefs also apply here.

Note that most food services will require product liability insurance, standard packaging and grading, and readable invoices. Many food services use a purchase order system that can require a grower to be approved as a vendor before an order can be placed, unless the grower has a credit card system in place. Food services generally pay the standard wholesale price but are often interested in contracting for product throughout a season, which can balance out price fluctuations from week to week. In addition, to protect themselves from legal claims, many food services require that suppliers have a hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP) safety audit system in place.

Direct store sales

Regional wholesale marketing of vegetables to chain or independent supermarkets is a viable marketing outlet for both large- and small-scale vegetable producers in Missouri. Many consumers request that their local supermarkets buy locally grown produce. To evaluate this market outlet, identify all food retailers in your area, and visit or call each store to determine if they are interested in purchasing locally grown produce.

Direct marketing to supermarkets eliminates the need for a broker and allows growers to label their produce. Large-scale producers can market large lots of produce by selling wholesale to a supermarket. Small-scale producers can fulfill the demand for niche produce items that supermarkets cannot purchase through traditional wholesale channels. Many upscale or specialty supermarkets may be looking for premium, farm-fresh produce items, such as organic, ethnic, heirloom or baby vegetables.

Harvest scheduling is crucial for marketing to supermarkets, since produce cannot be delivered to market every day. Supermarkets require a consistent supply and quality of produce. The labor or equipment to harvest produce on a timely basis must be available, and coolers may be needed to preserve postharvest quality and for short-term storage. Most supermarkets require product liability insurance, and some require growers to attend food safety training, to have a third-party auditor and to have specific requirements for harvesting, packaging and handling produce. For example, most supermarkets require the items to fit on a 40-by-48-inch pallet for ease of handling in the warehouse or store.

Some supermarkets will accept locally grown produce at the local store, and others may require the produce to be delivered to a central warehouse facility. Contact the local produce manager from the supermarket you are interested in selling to, and establish a relationship with the buyers. Buyers may wish to inspect the farm and discuss production practices used to grow the crop. Prices for produce are negotiated with each buyer, but price levels do not fluctuate significantly.

Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)

The FSMA was signed into law in 2011 and establishes minimum standards for food safety. It was prompted by the report of many food-borne illnesses prior to that date and represents the first major revision of food safety laws since 1938. The goal of the FSMA is to ensure a safe supply of food by shifting government emphasis from reacting to food safety incidences to preventing them. As food suppliers, vegetable growers with annual sales of more than \$25,000 are subject to the terms of the FSMA and must become familiar with it. Visit www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/FSMA/default.htm for more information.

Good Agriculture Practices (GAP)

There are several types of GAP certification; all are aimed at ensuring that food producers adhere to practices consistent with the production of safe food. GAP programs usually are buyer-imposed and set standards for growers to follow. Various produce marketing outlets may require GAP certification of some sort. The FSMA is altogether separate from GAP certification and is not a substitute. Check with your marketing outlet to see if their vendors must be GAP certified. If so, your local extension specialist can provide additional information on obtaining GAP certification.

Pricing vegetables

Setting price is a critical component of successful marketing. Vegetable growers have a greater level of control than most other growers over marketable yields, input costs and price. The closer a grower is to the consumer, the more control over price the grower has. Buyers perceive price to represent value of the product. Underpricing, or pricing too low, gives the perception the product is inferior, and setting the price too high often drives customers away. Many growers make the mistake of setting the price too low at the beginning of the marketing season when competition is low and demand is high and then find it difficult to increase price later in the season. Before setting price, gauge the level of competition and the consumer demand for your product. For example, organic produce may have a stronger demand in urban areas, so prices can be set at a higher level. Also, early-season produce, such as tomatoes, has high demand with little competition in most markets, resulting in a higher price range.

There are several techniques for setting price. The most direct method is relative pricing. Relative pricing involves acquiring price information from competitors and setting your price relative to that level. Though a direct, easy way to set price, this may not be the most profitable method because individual growers have different production costs and quality. Local produce is fresh and often vine-ripe, and should therefore receive a higher price than imported produce at most supermarkets. So, the price of imported vegetables can often be used as the base price.

Cost-oriented pricing is the best method for setting price for vegetables. With cost-oriented pricing, the grower needs to know costs of production. When growers know both the fixed and variable costs of producing their vegetables, they can determine the break-even price. Fixed costs, commonly called overhead costs, are costs that do not change regardless of the level of production. Land rent, property taxes and depreciation are common fixed costs. Variable costs are input costs that vary with each production season and type of vegetable. Seed, fertilizer, boxes, fuel and labor are examples of variable costs. Variable and fixed costs added together are the total costs of production and can be averaged over the marketable yield to get an average total cost per pound, box or bushel. Break-even price is the price for a produce item at a certain level of yield where total costs are covered. This is the price floor for a grower's vegetables. Selling below this price level for a significant period of time will lower net income. However, once this price level is determined, most growers establish a price margin above this level to secure a profit.

Because most supermarkets, institutions and restaurants contract with growers, these market outlets maintain a relatively stable price through the marketing season. Wholesale produce auctions, farmers markets and roadside markets experience variable pricing based on local supply and demand.

Resources

American Vegetable Grower. Toll-free: 800-572-7740.
<http://www.growingproduce.com>

Building a Sustainable Business: A Guide to Developing a Business Plan for Farms and Rural Businesses. 2003. Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. <http://www.misa.umn.edu/Publications/BuildingASustainableBusiness>

Community Supported Agriculture. Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, National Agricultural Library. <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml>

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide. 1993. DeMuth, S. USDA: National Agricultural Library. <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csadef.shtml>

Farmers' Markets: Rules, Regulations and Opportunities. 2002. Hamilton, Neil D. National Center for Agricultural Law Research and Information Center. http://nationalaglawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/articles/hamilton_farmersmarkets.pdf

The Farmer's Legal Guide to Producer Marketing Associations. 2005. O'Brien, D.; Hamilton, N.D.; and Luedeman, R. National Agricultural Law Center. http://new.nationalaglawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/articles/obrien_producermarketing_book.pdf

Growing for Market. A newsletter and website for produce growers. Toll-free: 800-307-8949. <http://www.growingformarket.com>

LocalHarvest. This website is heavily marketed to consumers and is a great place to list your farm for free. Consumers moving to new areas can find u-pick, farmers markets and CSAs through this site. <http://www.localharvest.org>

Food Circles Networking Project is an MU Extension program that connects farmers and consumers around local food. The project offers guides to sourcing local foods and information on creating community food systems. <http://foodcircles.missouri.edu>

The New Farmers' Market: Farm-Fresh Ideas for Producers, Managers and Communities. 2001. Corum, V., Rosenzweig, M. and Gibson, E. New World Publishing, Auburn, Calif.

North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association. Toll-free: 888-884-9270. <http://www.nafdma.com>

Marketing Options for Commercial Vegetable Growers. University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, publication ID-134. www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id134/id134.htm

Missouri Vegetable and Fruit Growers Database. <http://agebb.missouri.edu/hortgrow>

Missouri Produce Auction Report. <http://agebb.missouri.edu/hort/auction>

National Cooperative Business Association. Information on forming a cooperative business. <http://ncba.coop>

Sell What You Sow: The Grower's Guide to Successful Produce Marketing. 1994. Gibson, E. New World Publishing, Auburn, Calif.

The Legal Guide for Direct Farm Marketing. 1999. Hamilton, N.D. Drake University Agricultural Law Center, Des Moines, Iowa.

The Packer. A newspaper and website for commercial produce growers. Contains wholesale terminal market price information. Toll-free: 866-647-0918. <http://www.thepacker.com>

Vegetable Growers News. Phone: 616-887-9008. <http://www.vegetablegrowersnews.com>

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