

Oregon farmers' markets find a new customer: schools

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

The farmers' market has proven to be a great place to find and purchase fresh, local food. For the same reason, it offers a connection between Oregon schools and local growers who can supply food that may eventually reach kids throughout the state. With the start of this year's farmers' market season, some school districts are looking to locate local food items this spring and the farms that produce them. "Farmers' markets can be used as one of the most effective tools for rounding the whole circle of local food going from farm to school," says Cory Schreiber, manager of the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Farm-to-School Program. With more than 90 farmers' markets and about 280 school districts in the state, there should be a great opportunity to establish or strengthen the connection. "For farm-to-school programming, it's a matter of schools targeting the foods they want," says Schreiber. "For example, here we are in early April, and school food service administrators realize some farmers' markets already have asparagus, radishes, snow peas, and other fresh produce. By the end of the current school year, there will be such items as fresh strawberries. Simply put, farmers' markets are a great place for schools to find local food and develop a connection to local farms." Currently, there are probably less than a dozen school districts in Oregon taking advantage of farmers' markets to make the local food connection. But ODA's Schreiber and Joan Ottinger, his counterpart at the Oregon Department of Education, are promoting farmers' markets as part of their farm-to-school outreach efforts to identify what local foods are available in a specific geographic area. "You get a face, you get a place, you get the name of a farm," says Schreiber. "Farmers' markets can be a medium for contact and, ultimately, sales of local foods to schools. A farmers' market is a platform to smell, taste, and identify foods from local farms. School districts can get information about what foods are available, make a transaction, and build upon the relationship with local growers." Here's how the system ideally works. A school district's food service buyer visits a local farmers' market- usually a weekend or a mid-week day that it is operating- and gets an idea of what local foods are available and who is selling it. Contacting the market manager ahead of time can be an effective way to pinpoint the vendors who may have the specific foods of interest. Orders can be placed at the market, the grower can plan to bring extra product the following week, and school districts can pick it up at the market. In some cases, growers may agree to make an extra stop when they come to town and deliver the food directly to the schools. "Schools can even bring the farmer back in mid-week to talk about their product to students when it is delivered," says Schreiber. "It can be strawberries picked that morning and served at lunch that afternoon." Those local farmers who are selling directly to schools generally feel good about it because of the imprint they are making on the palates of young people. In essence, they are developing the buyers of the future. And, there is no doubt that students have a higher satisfaction when the food is fresh or ripe. "Kids get a great education when we offer them local foods," says Katrina Wiest, nutritionist for the Bend-La Pine School District. "We are promoting Oregon agriculture and feeding fresh, local healthy food to students. It's the best food on the planet." The Bend-La Pine School District has been working with local growers for five years. Wiest not only works for the district, but manages the Bend Farmers' Market. So she has a special insight on how farmers' markets can aid the farm-to-school movement. "We provide 16,000 meals a day," she says. "This gives farmers another market for their products. I don't see any barriers to school districts taking advantage of what the local grower can offer. For us, local farmers are willing to meet or beat the wholesale price the district pays for food. The only challenge is making sure there is a balance between the schools and the farmers' markets. Even if schools can provide a great market for growers, I don't want them to stop providing products to the community at farmers' markets." Even though the Bend Farmers' Market doesn't open until June, Wiest has established strong business relationships with local producers such as Kimberly Orchards (apples, pears, peaches, plums) and Painted Hills Beef of Fossil. She has had to reach out across the Cascades for some products, in the case of Happy Harvest Farms of Mt. Angel (berries and assorted vegetables), because the Central Oregon climate delays local production during the school months. In some cases, Wiest relies on frozen local products- individually quick frozen (IQF) Oregon Marionberries and frozen beef- to stretch throughout the school year. But as the weather warms, the district takes advantage of the same fresh products available at farmers' markets. A survey conducted by ODA's Schreiber indicates up to 30 percent of Oregon's school food service buyers are truly interested in the farm-to-school movement and actively look to purchase local foods for their school lunch and breakfast programs. "Food service

administrators do express some disappointment with large broad line distributors because they can't always track the product and they can't always get it when it's fully ripe," says Schreiber. "When you are dealing with farmers' markets, you know you are buying fruits and vegetables at the peak of ripeness. You also know exactly where it came from." Many food service buyers from school districts probably look at farmers' markets as a great place to do some personal shopping. It may be time to consider the markets as a great place for professional shopping.

Oregon farmers' markets find a new customer: schools by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources