

New Farmer's Guide: Cultivating Success at Farmers Markets

by Randii MacNear and Shelly G. Keller



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This publication is based on work supported by the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA, under Grant Number 12-25-G-1133 to the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, Davis, CA. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Graphic design and photography by Patricia Graves

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INTRODUCTION

Davis Farmers Market—established in 1976 by four pioneering farmers who were recent UC Davis graduates—has become one of the premier farmers markets in the country. It is the only California Certified Farmers Market with its own pavilion (built by the City of Davis), enabling the Market to be open twice a week, year-round, rain or shine.

Today, Davis Farmers Market operates two markets a week in Central Park (Saturdays, 8 am-1 pm; Wednesdays, 4:30-8:30 pm mid-March through October and 2-6 pm November through mid-March). We also manage UC Davis Farmers Market at the Silo on campus on Wednesdays, 11 am to 1:30 pm in the Spring and Fall quarters, and the Sutter Davis Hospital Farmers Market, on Thursdays 10 am to 1 pm, May through August at the hospital's entrance.

In 2010, the USDA awarded a Farmers Market Promotion Program grant—one of five awarded in California—to UC Davis for a project entitled, “Growing Farmers through Health Care Partnerships.” Davis Farmers Market partnered with UC Davis Sustainable Agriculture, Research and Education Program to research, market and open a farmers market at the entrance to Sutter Davis Hospital. The grant also funded work to implement institutional changes in how the hospital purchases food and promotes local food and farmers to hospital staff and patients.

That grant included a training component for new farmers and this guide reveals the information, experience and knowledge Davis Farmers Market staff gained while opening and managing the Sutter Davis Hospital Farmers Market. What we learned about emerging farmers markets is this: new small farmers are key to building new farmers markets. Cultivating those new farmers in small or emerging farmers markets can help those farmers advance to larger, more successful markets. Emerging farmers markets are the training ground and the proving ground for new farmers market sellers.

Davis Farmers Market has a history of successful, sustainable growth and we pride ourselves on discovering new ways to grow both new farmers and farmers markets. This manual provides an overview for new farmers, ranchers and food producers about engaging in direct marketing via farmers markets. Plus, you'll find advice from successful sellers at Davis Farmers Market.

You will learn why farmers markets are good for small farmers, and the traits of successful farmers market sellers. You will learn



how to examine your readiness to sell at farmers markets and how to plan, including researching markets, estimating costs, connecting with farmers market managers, creating a farmers market stand that works, delivering good customer service, expanding your market, and tracking and evaluating results.

This how-to guide shares what we know from our personal perspectives: that of a 30-year veteran farmers market manager, and a 30-year marketing professional, who work together to promote and grow farmers markets and small farms.

As you move through the process of becoming a farmers market seller and gain experience, consider referring to this guide frequently. You'll discover that your new farmers market selling experience will help you see the advice and tips in this guide with a fresh perspective.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Randii MacNear is Executive Director and Market Manager of the Davis Farmers Market, one of the largest Certified Farmers Markets in California, with a national reputation including being voted "America's Favorite Farmers Market" in 2009. In 2012 *USA Today* ranked Davis No. 2 in its list of 10 Great Places to Shop at a Farmers Market, and *U.S. News & World Report* ranked the Market No. 5 in its list of America's 10 Best Farmers Markets.

With over 30 years in the farmers market industry, MacNear is responsible for the bi-weekly, year-round Davis Farmers Market, as well as the UC Davis Farmers Market and Sutter Davis Hospital Farmers Market. She co-founded the industry organization, California Federation of Certified Farmers Markets and is a member of the statewide UC Davis Farm Center Advisory Group. For eight years, MacNear served on the board of the North American Farm Direct Marketing Association and chaired its North American Farmers Market Coalition. She was a member of the USDA Forum on Farmers Markets, the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Certified Farmers Market Advisory Committee, and WIC Roundtable. She has been a featured speaker at California Farm Conferences, and numerous national and international symposiums. MacNear has consulted on farmers market projects in California, New Mexico, Hawaii and Japan. She currently serves on the board of Yolo Farm to Fork, the Small Farm Center Agricultural Tourism Workgroup, Davis Farm to School Project, Yolo County Ag Futures Alliance, California Federation of Certified Farmers Markets, and Yolo County Visitor's Bureau.

“If you want to get into a successful market like Davis Farmers Market, you have to have great product. The best.

Be friendly, because you're going to meet a lot of people. You need to be able to talk, interact and ask and answer questions. I get a lot of questions. The goal is to communicate with customers.

Be prepared to get along with everybody at the market, even people who aren't very friendly.”

Lucas Boucher
Boucher Plants
Suisun City, CA
DFM seller since 2012



MacNear has contributed to over a dozen publications about farmers markets, including: *The Davis Farmers Market Cookbook* (Brennan and Evans, 2012); *The Farmers Market Management Series: Vol. 1, Starting a New Farmers Market*, and *Vol. 2 Farmers Market Management Skills* (Small Farm Center, UC Davis, 2005); *The New Farmers Market: Farm-Fresh Ideas for Producers, Managers & Communities* (V. Corum, M. Rosenweig and E. Gibson, 2001); *Cultivating Common Ground: Biennial Report of the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program* (UC Davis, 2000); *Sell What You Sow!—The Grower’s Guide to Successful Produce Marketing* (E. Gibson, 1994); and *Organizing a Certified Farmers’ Market* (Revised), (California Department of Food & Agriculture, 1992).



MacNear has a B.A. in Art from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Shelly Keller has been marketing and events manager at Davis Farmers Market since 2008, providing marketing, media relations, promotions, special event management, advertising and long-range planning for Davis Farmers Market as well as the Sutter Davis Hospital Farmers Market.



Keller was founding food editor and writer for *Solano Magazine* from 2004 to 2008. From 1986 to 2004, she was president of Keller Marketing & Communications, a small business that produced special events, marketing campaigns, publications and training programs for public agencies, small businesses and non-profits. She has taught two semesters of “Writing for PR” at UC Davis Extension, and “How to Shop the Farmers Market” for Sacramento’s Learning Exchange.

Keller’s articles about food and farmers markets have appeared in *The Sacramento Bee*, *The Davis Enterprise*, *Edible Sacramento*, *Winters Express*, *Solano Magazine* and *Inside the City*.

Keller has a B.S. in home economics from the University of Maryland, College Park.



WHY FARMERS MARKETS ARE GOOD FOR FARMERS

Farmers markets have grown in number dramatically in the last twenty years. According to the USDA, between 1994 and 2011, the number of farmers markets has grown from 1,755 to 7,175. Those new farmers markets have added new opportunities for small farmers to sell directly to consumers at retail prices. For decades, farmers markets have helped small farmers grow their businesses in several other ways as well.

Farmers markets benefit new farmers in many ways:

- Farmers markets are especially suited to the small farmer and markets often function as business incubators.
- Farmers markets offer better pricing opportunities, often substantially higher than wholesale.
- Farmers markets let the grower set the price, while creating cash flow.
- Farmers markets benefit farms that are family businesses.
- They offer an inexpensive and efficient way for small farmers to reach consumers.
- Farmers markets offer farmers personal satisfaction and social interaction between seller and customer, and among market sellers.
- They create a bond between producer and consumer that does not occur in traditional grocery stores.
- Farmers markets give farmers an opportunity to try new crops and get valuable feedback from customers.
- Farmers markets require farmers to spend little or no money on packaging, advertising or promotion.
- Most farmers markets offer exemption from standard size and pack regulations.
- They require minimal start-up costs, usually requiring only a truck and a farmers market stand.
- Farmers markets create an atmosphere where consumers can learn about farming, farm products, nutrition, and food security.

Farmers markets function as business incubators because they offer an efficient and inexpensive means of reaching consumers.



New sellers get exposure to experienced sellers, who can provide advice and answer questions that many new farmers have during the first years of their fledgling business.

Small farmers also get a better price for their products at farmers markets than they can wholesale. Farmers can bring varieties they couldn't otherwise sell wholesale, and products that don't make standard pack and grade. Plus, the cash transactions at farmers markets also help farmers with cash flow. When a farmer sells wholesale, it's 30 days out for payment, and sometimes no payment at all. This makes farmers markets more economically viable and a better economic model for farmers than selling at wholesale.

The social nature of farmers markets also provides farmers with positive feedback from consumers, while being good for their morale. Farmers markets help farmers feel appreciated for their work. That just doesn't happen a lot in farming except at farmers markets.

TRAITS OF SUCCESSFUL FARMERS MARKET SELLERS

Farmers who enjoy success at farmers markets share several traits. These include:

- Enjoying selling to and interacting with the public
- Participating as a team-player at farmers markets
- Understanding the importance of knowing and following farmers market's rules and regulations
- Ability to take direction from the farmers market manager
- Ability to accept the authority of the market manager as the representative of the market's governing board
- Understanding that while their farm operation is their individual business, in a farmers market each farmer is part of a cooperative store and they have to abide by decisions made for the whole market, not just for the individual farmer
- Competency in post-harvest handling—this includes knowing when to harvest and still get product to market while it's looking its best.

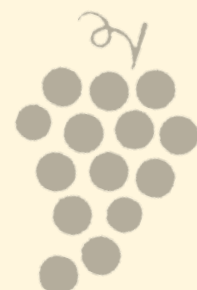
“Engage with your customers. Make eye contact with those walking by. Smile! Stay off the phone.

Offer free samples as best you can in conformance with market standards and regulations. Be generous.

Offer 'bulk' discounts. If someone wants a whole box or boxes, recognize that you won't have to invest as much time per unit to make that sale.

Boil down your display to as simple an exercise as you can. Nice looking for sure, but something that is easy to set up AND pack up and transport.”

Rich Collins
California Vegetable
Specialties
Rio Vista, CA
DFM seller since 1989



READINESS: IS SELLING AT A FARMERS MARKET RIGHT FOR YOU?

All new endeavors require a certain level of readiness if you are to be successful. Being “ready” requires knowledge and awareness of what a new endeavor requires, and your willingness to do what is necessary to succeed. It’s difficult to know if you are “ready” if you have no knowledge of how a farmers market functions, what opportunities farmers markets offer, and whether you have the necessary qualities for success.

One of the biggest issues is this: if you don’t like to talk to customers, and you do not have the energy to be an active seller—then selling at farmers markets is probably not right for you. You have to understand that your goal at a farmers market is to engage customers and move product during the 4-5 hours of a market. If you don’t like to talk to strangers, if you aren’t a social person, if you do not have the patience to answer questions and interact with customers, you will probably not enjoy success as a farmers market seller.

Another gauge of readiness is your ability to follow farmers market rules and regulations. That requires good communication with the market manager, understanding the importance of arriving on time, and being aware of your place in the market as part of a team. While farming allows you to be your own boss, farmers markets require that you are able to take direction from the market manager. That means following rules and regulations that are not of your own making. Selling at a farmers market requires that you participate in a system where you didn’t help make the rules, and maybe don’t agree with them. Following market rules and regulations are a necessary aspect of being a farmers market seller.

Knowing if you are ready to sell at farmers markets requires that you do some research.

- Which markets do you want to be part of?
- Do those markets already have sellers with products that you grow?
- How far are you willing to travel (round-trip) to sell?
- How much time can you afford to be away from farming?
- Who will sell your products if you cannot be at the market?



- Will the time you spend selling at farmers markets produce the revenue you need?
- Can you afford the fees of the farmers markets where you want to sell?
- Do you feel like you will fit in at those markets?
- Are you committed to being a regular seller at farmers markets?

You can answer most of these questions by doing three things:

1. Research the farmers markets in your area.
2. Visit the markets where you would like to sell.
3. Talk to sellers at those markets to determine customer traffic, competition, sales potential, ease of working with the market manager there, and the personality of that market.

The more you know about the farmers markets you are interested in, the more you will be able to evaluate your readiness. The Readiness Check-list on page 29 can help you assess your prospects for success.

PREPARING TO SELL AT FARMERS MARKETS

Once you've determined your readiness to become a farmers market seller, take time to put in writing the answers to these key questions:

1. What products will I sell?
2. What kinds of customers will I serve?
3. What is unique about the products I will sell?
4. How will I price my products?
5. What does my farm's brand look like?
6. What does my farm's retail stand look like?
7. Where should we display my farm's logo, banner or sign?
8. How can I make my products more appealing to customers?

“Be honest and be consistent. Be reliable and be on time at every market.”

It takes a lot of work to sell at farmers markets. If you bring good quality, people will come back to your stand again.”

Luis Guevara
Rancho Mi Familia Fruit &
Produce, Inc.
Santa Maria, CA
DFM seller since 1999



PRICING AND PRICING STRATEGIES

Prices at farmers markets are influenced by two things: production costs and customers' willingness to pay. When you set prices for your products, it is important to set them at a level that covers all your costs plus a fair profit. Prices are also somewhat dependent on competitors' prices, and customers' demand for your products. When there are several sellers offering the same products, competition exerts more influence over the price you can set.

Your best selling price falls somewhere between what you need to cover costs and what the customer is willing to pay. Usually, prices at farmers markets fall somewhere between wholesale and retail grocery store or food co-op prices. The first step to pricing your products is to know your costs. The goal is not just to sell your produce, but to make a profit selling it. If you can't sell a crop for more than your production and marketing costs, don't grow it. Good recordkeeping—tracking costs and returns for each crop separately—will reveal which crops are profitable and which are not. Trial and error is a natural part of setting prices. Your price is probably too low if other sellers start to complain to the market manager about your prices; or if your prices are substantially lower than other sellers at that market. In some markets, low prices can also be a niche for reaching price-sensitive customers. And remember, farmers market customers are looking for quality first, and then price.

Multiple pricing allows you to charge a per-pound price, and then a lower price for higher-volume purchases. For example, you might price a product at \$1 per pound, or 3 pounds for \$2.50. This encourages customers to buy more and save.

Volume pricing—setting a lower price for flats of berries, boxes of tree fruits or 20-pound units of vegetables—increases sales during peak season when customers are freezing or home-canning fresh produce.

Bag pricing is another way to attract customers. By bagging produce in half-pound or one-pound bags or \$1 and \$2 bags, the customer can determine at a glance if that bag of produce looks like a good value. Many shoppers don't have any idea what a pound of something looks like, and this strategy makes it easier for them to decide to buy your products.



SETTING GOALS

When preparing to sell at farmers markets, it is important to set reasonable goals. How many farmers markets do you have time to sell at? How far are you willing to travel to sell at farmers markets? Which farmers markets would you like to be part of? If you can devote three days a week to selling at farmers markets, this information can help you when you research prospective markets.

Davis Farmers Market operates four markets in Davis: two markets in the Pavilion in Central Park, one on Wednesday afternoons and one on Saturday mornings. Davis Farmers Market also operates the UC Davis Farmers Market on Wednesdays during Spring and Fall Quarters; and the Sutter Davis Hospital Farmers Market on Thursdays from May through August.

Nearly every new farmer approaches us about selling at our two largest, and most successful markets in the Pavilion in Central Park. The waiting list to become a seller at our large markets gets longer and longer every year because sellers at that market have been around for years or decades. Successful markets tend to be full, with plenty of satisfied, committed sellers, making those farmers markets very hard to get into. But getting into our small or new markets is considerably easier to do. Those farmers markets are often a perfect match for the new small farmer.

As you set your sights on farmers markets where you want to sell, consider the size of the market, how long that market has been operating, and who else sells there. It is also advantageous, when possible, to apply to farmers markets or farmers market organizations that operate more than one market. Small farmers are more likely to get into one of the smaller markets operated by those organizations.

Another advantage to working with operators of many markets is this: as your farm grows, you may be able to move up into one of the larger markets when an opening occurs. That's because you have developed a relationship with the farmers market manager/operator by selling at a small market, establishing your credibility as an active seller who follows the rules and adds to the market's success.

“The most important thing is to visit a few farmers market to see if their atmosphere, sellers and shoppers are appropriate to your commodity.

We found that the farmers markets closest to our farm are most receptive. The fact that our farm is close by, and that they would be welcome to visit our farm, means a lot to them.

You have to remember that when you're selling food at a farmers market, you are selling retail food. It is important to understand the rules related to food products and fresh produce to ensure that your product is safe because you have a lot to lose if your customers get sick.”

Dan Jones
Islote Farm, Esparto, CA
DFM seller since 2011

RESEARCHING PROSPECTIVE MARKETS

There are several excellent sources of information about farmers markets. The USDA's Directory of Farmers Markets has information on location, days and hours of operation, size, and number of vendors. The website, localharvest.com, also provides information on farmers markets. Another web site, cafarmersmarkets.com, provides contact information, times, locations, size, and operator of a particular market in your city, county or region. You can also search this website for farmers markets based on size (under 10 sellers; 10-20 sellers; 21-35 sellers; and over 35 sellers).

To map your prospective markets, mark the location of your farm and draw a circle around it that represents the distance you are willing to travel to sell at farmers markets. Now you can search the databases above to come up with a list of prospective farmers markets that meet your needs.

As you consider markets, pay close attention to the days and hours of each market's operation. Often you can piggyback small markets, selling at a morning/mid-day market and an evening market held nearby later that same day. This creates efficiencies that small farmers need to succeed. Even if you can only be away from the farm three days a week, you might be able to sell at as many as six markets in a week.

Knowing which farmers markets you want to be part of is the first step. Visit the markets you're interested in. Evaluate their potential for you as a seller. And remember that small farmers who don't grow organics, probably shouldn't be part of a market that focuses on organics.

While you can learn a lot about farmers markets from researching the Internet—market age, location, hours, rules, regulations and fees—nothing reveals as much about a farmers market as visiting it. With your map and farmers market prospect list in hand, visit each market and assess traffic, customers, seller pricing, competition, space available, and marketing style of sellers.

The Farmers Market Visit Evaluation form on pages 30-31 can help you choose the farmers markets that offer the best fit and the most potential for you and your farm.

“Go to farmers markets and look for products that are missing or in short supply. Don't try to come into a market with peaches or squash or something that's really common.

Look for markets whose size will support you. Markets should be big enough to support your product. If you only go to one small market and expect to make a living, that's probably not going to happen. If you sell at multiple small markets, or get into one or two larger ones your sales will be higher.

Connecting with customers is not about sales; it's about education. A farmers market is farming for cooking. Be prepared to talk in depth about how to cook your products and be excited about it. If you don't love to

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GETTING YOUR DOCUMENTS TOGETHER

Each farmers market has different requirements for documentation, depending on the county they are located in, and the rules and regulations governing that market. Every small farmer who sells at a California Certified Farmers Market will need to have a Certified Producer Certificate (see below for the link) before they can be admitted into a farmers market. You should have this document before you begin to contact farmers market managers about selling at their market. You can get any other necessary documents together once you are admitted to a farmers market.

Farmers markets differ in how to apply to be a vendor, and you can find this information on the web site of the farmers markets you are interested in.

While all farmers markets are different, here is the process we used at Davis Farmers Market: Farmers may apply to the Davis Farmers Market with their agricultural products (fruits, vegetables, herbs, mushrooms, nuts, honey, flowers) and their non-certifiable agricultural products (meats, poultry, eggs, dairy products, aqua-culture). All products must be grown in California. In order to sell certifiable agricultural products, your farm must be certified by the Department of Food and Agriculture in the county where the products are grown or raised. You must have your current Certified Producers Certificate on file with the farmers markets where you sell.

Certified Producer Certificate online application: http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/egov/farmersmarket/producers_app_step1.asp

Certified Producers Application to Sell: The application requires your signature which attests that you have read Davis Farmers Market Association's Rules and Regulations, and which states you agree to abide by those rules.

Fees: Stall Fees are calculated as a percentage of the seller's gross sales for that Market Day. A minimum stall fee will be collected for each space used, even in case of no sales.

- **Members:** 6% of gross sales (\$30 minimum on Saturday, \$20 minimum at Picnic in the Park on Wednesdays, 4:30-8:30 pm and \$10 minimum at the UC Davis Farmers Market)
- **Membership Dues:** \$40 first year, \$25 subsequent years
- **Non-Members:** 8% of gross sales, \$26 minimum (you must be a member to sell on Saturday or at the UC Davis or Sutter Davis Farmers Markets).

cook and eat what you grow, how can you share that enthusiasm with customers?

People are buying raw ingredients, and if there is a market seller who is excited, customers share that excitement. It's important to have those conversations, and that shared experience of being excited about your food."

Kristy Lyn Levings
Cache Creek Meat
Company
Esparto, CA



ESTIMATING YOUR COSTS

In addition to the costs associated with growing your crops, there are costs specific to farmers markets, including membership fees and daily market fees. Other costs include: county certificate fees; transport and delivery of your products; pop-up tents, tables and chairs; scale, calculator and cash register or cash box; reusable crates, boxes or baskets plus packing materials for transporting and displaying produce; supplies for sampling (containers with lids, tongs and gloves); customer shopping bags; farm sign or banner; pricing signs; labor costs of staffing your booth; and printed fliers about product storage and recipes (if you choose to use them to promote your farm and your products). Whether you staff your own booth, or pay a family member or employee to sell for you, be sure to account for the value of your own time spent at the farmers market. You can use the Budgeting Farmers Market Costs form on page 26 to estimate costs.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MARKET MANAGERS

Market managers are the gatekeepers of the farmers markets they manage. You only get one chance to make a first impression with a market manager, and if you want to sell at his or her market, you want to make a good one.

First, be sure you have your Certified Producers Certificate (CPC) before you approach a market manager. Your CPC needs to be displayed at every farmers market where you sell, and every market where you sell needs to have a copy of your current CPC on file. Download the application for any farmers market where you want to sell, and bring the completed application with you, even if you do not know if there is space in that farmers market. These two documents help the market manager learn who you are, what you sell, and how committed you are to selling at his or her market.

Because market managers have different management styles and preferences about communication, it is not usually a good idea to just show up at the market and expect the manager to have time to talk with you. Call or email the market manager to schedule a time to talk. Find out their preferred communication style. Do they prefer email or phone? Do they have a slow time at their market when they have time to talk with you?

Market managers receive dozens of inquiries from small farmers, and you want to begin your relationship by valuing their time



and respecting their styles of communication. Most market managers prefer emails to phone calls because of their efficiency. But finding out early how the manager likes to do business will go a long way toward getting you and your farm into the farmers markets you favor.

PITCHING YOUR FARM TO A MARKET MANAGER

Market managers want to know about you and your farm. How long have you been farming? How committed are you to being at his or her market every week? What makes your products desirable and unique? Is it the variety of products, the quality, or product uniqueness?

Knowing your sales expectations can help the market manager place you in a farmers market that is a good match for you as well as the market. Your willingness to start in a small market helps build trust with the manager, while getting your relationship with the manager off on the right footing. Above all, farmers that are new to farmers markets cannot expect to start in the bigger, more successful markets. That rarely happens.

FOLLOW-THROUGH BUILDS TRUST

By developing a person-to-person relationship with the market manager, you begin your partnership in a way that promotes learning and communication. Study your farm to see what products are coming to harvest and keep the market manager informed. Be consistent and organized. Market managers will appreciate your professionalism while you build trust and credibility.



YOUR FARMERS MARKET RETAIL STAND

Think about what your style is. What is your décor? The days of putting out an old, dirty table with boxes on it are over. Good markets are looking for more than that. If you don't know what kind of booth you want, look at displays at farmers markets and figure out which style feels like you. It really pays off to see what successful sellers' booths and stands look like, so you can create a selling space that reflects you, your farm and your style. Realize that the most successful sellers have a style and a décor that they brand for themselves and they carry it out at every single market. And a recognizable style helps customers find your stand at the market.

Do you need shelter for your booth? A pop-up tent can protect product quality and provide customer comfort while defining your selling area. Most farmers markets are held rain or shine, and a pop-up tent can protect your products, your customers and you. A white fabric tent is best because blue and green fabrics make fruits and vegetables appear discolored.

DISPLAYING YOUR PRODUCTS

In farmers markets, display is defined as the general layout of your market booth or stand, including the fixtures you use to hold your products. There are two secrets to a good display: abundance and neatness. An attractive display is key to attracting customers, and distinguishing your farm—and you—from the other farms and farmers in the market. Customers buy more when displays are bountiful. Display your products so that they are easy for customers to reach. Keep used boxes, trash and damaged produce out of sight. Is your farm name prominently displayed? Does your display look abundant? Is your produce clean, neatly arranged and regularly inspected to remove damaged products?

Display fixtures can be wooden flats or crates, wicker or bushel baskets, or burlap bags over cardboard boxes. Customers like a stand that looks natural. A country look and old-fashioned containers can give your booth a farm atmosphere. Keep color in mind when selecting display materials and go for simple but effective color to dress up your display. Green, earth colors, and checked or gingham fabrics look great beneath fresh produce.

Whether you like baskets, or farm boxes and old lug boxes, create a plan for your booth and display, and work to improve it throughout the year.

“Our philosophy has always been, the more variety you have, the better. That allows us to sell as much as we can to each shopper. It's high management and more difficult to do, but all that variety pays off when you have a great display.

I think display is everything. Presentation is so important. You're creating an art palette when you create your farmers market display. Make sure you have tablecloths, use contrasting colors, and pay attention to how you put things together.

We used to handwrite prices on the tops of cardboard boxes and set them next to the produce, but we ended up with a lot of trash because products and prices change from week to week. Now we use very

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Finally, while plastic bins, plastic boxes and plastic containers may offer durability, convenience and ease of transport, go easy on using bright plastic in your display. The most colorful thing on your farmers market stand should be your products.

CREATING SIGNS THAT BRAND YOUR FARM

Signs can provide information to help you sell, add color to your stand, and help “brand” your farm. The three basic types of signs are: price signs, information signs, and brand signs.

Price signs are important and should be clearly marked near the products. Food shoppers are used to shopping retail stores where they don’t have to ask about prices. If they have to ask about the price, some shoppers may not even consider shopping at your stand. A large chalkboard or white board can be used in place of individual signs if you don’t have too many products. Or you can create price signs on cardboard, or purchase small chalkboards to display the price near each product. Some farmers markets have rules regarding price signs, so check your market’s rules before deciding how to display prices.

Product information signs include signs saying “organic” or “picked today.” Some include information about storage or cooking tips. If you offer a new or unusual variety of produce, label it with a sign and think about having a flier explaining how to store it and prepare it. And be sure to be aware of the labeling laws regarding organic produce.

Brand signs are used to convey your farm name, and develop name recognition. When a customer returns to the market, they are more likely to revisit your stand if they remember your name or what your farm sign looks like.

DRESSING FOR SALES SUCCESS

You and the people who help you sell are part of your display. If you don’t have aprons or t-shirts with your farm name on them, wear a farmers market apron. Consider wearing a hat—with either your farm name or the farmers market name on it. And wearing a nametag lets customers approach you to say, “Hello, Joe!”

small chalkboards, which is easier and part of our décor.

Since you’ll have different produce from week to week, you can’t set up your stand the same way every time. It makes sense to have versatile produce chalkboards—so you can switch them, and change them.

Get to know your customers’ names, and be willing to chat and have real conversations with them. That’s why people come to the market. They want that interaction with the farmer. That’s why it’s important that the farmer is the seller. It’s an opportunity for the farmer to have an exchange with the customers. You need to be there yourself as much as possible.”

Annie Main
Good Humus
Capay, CA

STAFFING YOUR FARMERS MARKET STAND

While one person can staff a small booth, having two people to wait on customers, re-stock the display and allow for breaks, is optimal. That's not usually possible for new farmers. If you cannot be at every market, it's important to use the same crew to sell at each market. Familiar faces help increase every customer's comfort level when they shop at your booth.

Most shoppers expect to be able to speak directly to the farmer, or someone who works on the farm. It is one of the appeals of buying directly from the producer. There will be times when you, the farmer, cannot staff your farmers market booth or stand. Many farmers involve family members in selling at the market. Some farmers bring their farm workers to help sell, while others employ people just to sell at the market.

Whenever you have family members or employees selling your products, you need to train them and provide guidance about how you expect them to interact with customers. Make a list of tasks when you involve family members or hire employees. Be specific, including when to arrive at the market, what to do regarding set-up, where to place signs, how to greet customers, and how to weigh produce and make correct change.

WELCOMING CUSTOMERS

Making eye contact is the best way to welcome customers. If a shopper cannot make eye contact with the person selling at your stand, that shopper may move on. If you don't want to lose the "people touch" that encourages people to visit and shop your stand, be sure employees and family know your rules about customer service, especially about being friendly and readily accessible. Tell your employees your rules regarding texting and talking on the phone, reading a book, using computers, or visiting with neighbors when the market is busy. And be sure employees are dressed appropriately.

You can build a relationship with each person who buys your products with a friendly greeting, a thank you, and taking time to visit. If a customer is looking but not buying, offer them a sample, or suggest a product that is at the peak of the season. One way to get repeat customers is to ask them to come back and tell you how they prepared your products. Keeping the "people touch" with customers, no matter who is doing the selling, will impact how much you sell at every farmers market. If you hire



someone who is friendly and cordial, you are going to sell more product and make more money.

Finally, tell the farmers market manager if you want his or her observations on how employees are doing. Also let the employees know you are asking the market manager to check on them.

OFFERING SAMPLES

Savvy sellers know that sampling is the most effective marketing method you can use. Sampling helps familiarize customers with your products. It's not only great advertising, it's inexpensive. If giving away \$50 in product makes the difference between a \$300 day and a \$600 day, it's worth it.

Sampling also helps shoppers choose your product because of taste, freshness and quality of the sample. And remember, shoppers are more inclined to sample if it is offered to them. Be sure to talk to the customer about what they are sampling. It's also a good idea to have a sign near sample containers that reads : "Try a free sample!"

Your samples should be fresh and their containers clean. Don't cut up too much product at one time, so you can offer the freshest samples. Check with the market manager and county health department about regulations concerning sampling. Follow health department guidelines. The most common regulations are: samples must remain covered; perishables must be iced; sellers doing sampling must wear food service rubber gloves; and samples must be offered using a disposable utensil or tongs without anyone's hands touching the sample.

CREATING EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER HANDOUTS

Many successful farmers market sellers have learned that fliers with product storage tips and simple recipes can help sell more product. Today's shoppers are looking for ways to use the produce and products they buy at farmers markets.

Sharing storage tips with shoppers—whether verbally or in print—helps them use every bit of product they buy without waste. Nobody wants to waste money on fresh food. Customers also like recipes—the fewer ingredients, the better—and everyone loves new ideas for what to cook for dinner.

“My biggest piece of advice for new farmers entering markets is find something to grow that nobody else is growing, or figure out a way to grow it BEFORE everybody else has it (like we do with tomatoes and melons).

Be flexible when it comes to attending markets, 'bloom' where the manager needs you to be—it does no good for anybody to be antagonistic.

Make your stall space welcoming, bright and colorful. Nothing is worse than looking at a stall and seeing stuff just thrown on the table.

Be polite, honest and helpful, and dress appropriately.

And ALWAYS bring plenty of change.”

Debbie Ramming
Pacific Star Gardens
Woodland, CA
DFM seller since 2002

Avoid printing full-page handouts. To be cost-effective and environmentally friendly, go with half-sheet or quarter-sheet fliers and recipes. Be sure to add your farm name, web site and email or phone number to your fliers. This helps brand your farm and your products and increases the likelihood that shoppers come back for more.

EXPANDING YOUR MARKETING

One of the considerable advantages of selling at farmers markets is that you don't have to do any advertising or publicity because the farmers market handles that. But there are affordable, and relatively easy ways to promote your farm beyond the farmers market.

On-line directories and web sites offer free listings for small farmers, especially those who sell through farmers markets or Community Supported Agriculture boxes (delivered to customers). Be sure to sign up to be included on these web sites: localharvest.org; farmtotableenm.org; and your State Department of Agriculture web site.

Hosting a web site for your farm is not a necessity for most small farmers. But today, creating a web site has never been easier. Customers are going to "Google" your farm one day. Give them a website with basic information to land on! Even if your web site simply states your farm's general location, your products, the farmers markets where you sell, and how to contact you, this is often enough information to promote your farm. Whether a customer is trying to find out when a certain product will be coming to market, or the markets where you sell, or wants to place a large order for canning or freezing, a web site is a good way for them to find you and get in touch.

Your web site can be simple, and should include:

- Your farm's name and/or logo
- Phone number where you can be reached quickly
- Location of your farm (not necessarily your address)
- What you grow
- List of farmers markets where you sell
- Photo(s) of you and/or your family on your farm
- Link to email you.

"Farmers market managers and sellers are all in this together. It is a privilege to have a space in a good market.

Every seller needs to actively participate in the market—by being a good seller and a team player, by helping other sellers, and making customers feel welcome. Every seller has a role in making their farmers markets better.

Play that role—to the hilt."

Randii MacNear
Davis Farmers Market
Market manager
since 1978



Here are some suggested sources for help creating a web site for your farm:

- Google Sites is free: <http://www.google.com/sites/help/intl/en/overview.html>
- Wordpress software to create web pages is free, but you need to find and pay for a web host. <http://wordpress.org/>

Here are additional sources for creating a simple web site:

<http://virb.com/>

<http://www.squarespace.com/>

Using Facebook seems to be the modern day version of staying in touch. Even if you don't use Facebook, many of your customers do. And while no one knows yet what kind of impact Facebook has on our purchasing habits, we do know that people share information on Facebook. If you have computer skills, you can probably set up your own [Facebook account](#). Use it a few days a week to post photos and information about your farm and your products coming to market. If you don't have computer skills, ask a family member or friend to help you. Consider trading product for their help. And ask them to show you how to post.

At Davis Farmers Market, we try to post on Facebook—usually once a day—4 or 5 days a week. We use Facebook to keep our customers informed about upcoming events, entertainment, what's in season, or days the market is closed. We post photos of people, upcoming events, produce and nutritional information. The number of people who “friend us” keeps growing and growing.

Using Media and Publicity—Most small farmers don't have the time to stay in touch with the media, and don't have to, because farmers markets handle that aspect of marketing. However, farmers markets—especially busy ones with good media connections—regularly get phone calls from reporters looking to interview a farmer who grows certain products coming into season. Be sure that the market managers where you sell have your current contact information where you can be reached.

Rule No. 1 of media relations and publicity: If the media calls, return the call. When you do, you'll probably get free publicity for your farm, which in turn expands the number of people aware of your farm and your products. If that reporter was referred to you by your farmers market manager, that also means publicity for that farmers market. And that will make the market manager happy, too.

“Maximize freshness. In the food biz, people feast with their eyes before they take the first bite. Know how to handle the crops to make them their most attractive and fresh-looking.

Scope out the markets you're interested in and try to find something to produce that is not at the market, or is under-represented.

Commit to staffing your own booth. Farmers markets are educational institutions, not just commercial outlets. Market managers will appreciate your being present to respond to customer inquiries and comments, and to volunteer information and perspectives on farming.”

Jim Eldon
Fiddlers Green Farm
Brooks, CA
DFM seller since 1992

If you don't return the call, three things will happen. That reporter will probably never call you again. You will have chosen to not to publicize your farm or help the market manager build awareness of his or her market and small farms. And the market manager will probably take your name off the market's media referral list.

STAYING IN TOUCH WITH MARKET MANAGERS

Market managers have lots of good information. Use your time at farmers markets as an opportunity to talk with them. If you're not the seller at the farmers market every week, it's important to check in with the market manager to see how your stand, and your employees are doing. The manager can offer suggestions about your display, your customers and your employees.

Remember that the market manager is on your side, and you want to be on his or her team. Too often, sellers see the market manager as "the market cop." Viewing the manager as a partner or coach will yield a better relationship and more opportunities for you at the market. It is always best to talk to the market manager, not to other sellers, if you have a problem.

Many small farmers are seasonal sellers at farmers markets, which means they don't have year-round contact with farmers market managers. If you know how your market managers like to communicate—and you will if you asked them when you first met them—you can touch base with them every few months by phone, or email or mail, whichever he or she prefers.

Tell market managers about any new products you are growing, or ask their advice about value-added products you want to bring to market. Give the manager samples of your products to try. Discuss when you'll be ready to return to the farmers market, and ask if there will be space available.

If your contact information—phone number, address or email—changes, be sure to let all of your market managers know. If you have a new business card, flier or recipe for your farm, send the farmers market managers a copy. Send a card thanking the manager for bringing you into the market. Like any relationship, a little bit of nurturing helps build a long-lasting relationship with your market manager, and ensures your spot in next year's market.

"The hardest working farmer I've known said, 'To be a farmer, you only need two things: a strong back and a weak mind.' While the strong back is absolutely true for farming, he never sold vegetables at a farmers market so the weak mind part is dated.

A person selling at a farmers market needs a sharp mind, a sense of humor, integrity, ethics, an aesthetic vision, honesty and morals. I try to focus on my ten feet of stall space and not worry about what other farmers are doing.

I want my customers to leave my stand feeling they got a good deal on the best vegetables they can get. You have to be serious about quality and fair prices."

Lloyd Johnson
Lloyd's Produce
Davis, CA
DFM seller since 1999

Farmers market managers and sellers are all in this together. It is a privilege to have a space in a good market. Everyone has to participate in the market—by being a good seller, a team player, helping other sellers, and making customers feel welcome. As a team player, you have a role in making the market better. Play that role—to the hilt.

TRACKING AND EVALUATING RESULTS

Success as a farmers market seller takes time. Establishing your farm, your products and yourself in a market cannot be accomplished overnight. Tracking your costs and your sales—by product—at every farmers market provides invaluable information that can inform your decisions about what you grow, how you set your prices and where you sell.

Do what most farmers market managers do: document every farmers market where you sell. Keep records of how much you brought to market, how much you sold, what your unit price was for each product, how much you brought home and notes about circumstances that affected sales. What pricing strategies did you use? How was customer traffic? If sales were especially good, try to determine why. What was the weather like (sales are usually slower on rainy days or really hot ones)? What do you plan to do differently the following week? Make note of holidays and whether they impacted your customer traffic and sales.

Collecting this information for each market throughout the year gives you a clear picture of what works to increase sales and what does not. Knowing what works can help you develop new strategies to increase sales and profit. And knowing what doesn't work allows you to stop doing the things that aren't successful and do more of the things that are.

“Know all about what you are selling: the name of the variety, its salient traits, how it differs from other varieties, its horticulture (irrigation, fertilizer, etc.), where to buy seeds or plants, how to cook your product, how to store it, etc.

Many customers want information to go with their purchase. This is why it is so much better to have the farmer selling because the farmer knows all this information.”

Mike Madison
Yolo Bulb
Winters, CA
DFM seller since 1989



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"Guarantee the quality of everything that you sell. Listen to your customers for suggestions of what to grow, how to prepare it, and how to market it.

Don't use hand-held devices—cell phones, Blackberrys and such—when you are selling at the Market. The message you send customers is, 'I'm too busy, I don't need to wait on you.'

Price everything on your table in legible handwriting. Customers do not like having to ask the price of everything. They'll just move on until they do see a stand with prices displayed.

Be nice to your customers, even ones you don't know. Many of those 'first-timers' have become my best customers."

Dianne Madison
Yolo Bulb, Winters, CA
DFM seller since 1989

READINESS CHECKLIST

Is selling at farmers markets a good fit for me?

- ☐ I am knowledgeable about farming and like to share my knowledge
- ☐ I enjoy talking with strangers
- ☐ I like sharing information about my products
- ☐ I am committed to producing high-quality products
- ☐ I am a team player who can follow rules
- ☐ I can take direction from others when necessary
- ☐ I know about post-harvest handling
- ☐ I have time to farm AND sell at farmers markets
- ☐ I am committed to being a farmers market seller
- ☐ I arrive on time every time
- ☐ I am willing to travel to sell at markets
- ☐ I enjoy packing, transporting and setting up my products for sale
- ☐ I am willing and able to be away from the farm to sell at markets
- ☐ I am a good “fit” for the farmers markets where I want to sell
- ☐ I am confident that direct marketing at farmers markets will maximize my revenue
- ☐ I have a plan for who will staff my farmers market stand
- ☐ I am committed to being a successful farmers market seller

If you agree with most of the statements above, then you are ready to be a farmers market seller. For any statements you did not check, consider how those statements might affect your enthusiasm and commitment to being a farmers market seller and how you will address those issues.

“It’s important to be outgoing with customers. You have to connect with people.

Sell what people want, not just what you want to grow.”

Michael McDonald
McDonald Orchards
Capay Valley, CA
DFM seller since 2004



“Good sellers enjoy talking with people, making friends with customers. Many customers are looking for advice. People like really fresh products. I like to grow almost everything, and I get a lot of customers because I do.”

Federico Toledo
Toledo Farm
Lodi, CA
DFM seller since 2011

FARMERS MARKET VISIT EVALUATION

Market name _____

Market contact person _____ E-mail _____ Phone _____

Market days and hours _____

Market fees _____

	YES	NO	COMMENT
I have a copy of market rules & regulations			
Within range of my farm			
Easy to find			
Plenty of parking within walking distance			
Manager is easily identifiable and has a professional appearance			
Manager is out and about in the market			
Manager does not also run his or her own stand in the market			
Directional signs			
Good customer traffic			
Clean, attractive location			
Restrooms nearby			
Trash receptacles			
Running water for hand washing			
Market information booth			
ATM on site			
Food Stamp/EBT accepted			
FMNP (Farmers Market Nutrition Program) Coupons accepted			
Vendor spaces are adequate			
Good traffic flow through market			
Friendly vendors			
Pleasant atmosphere			
Shoppers are enjoying themselves			
Sellers are enjoying themselves			
Good quality products			
Variety of products			
Range of prices			
Competing vendors			

FARMERS MARKET VISIT EVALUATION (CONTINUED)

SELLER PRODUCT SUMMARY (GIVE NUMBER OF EACH)

_____ Fruits	_____ Vegetables	_____ Herbs
_____ Local eggs	_____ Local honey	_____ Baked goods
_____ Local cheeses	_____ Meats	_____ Prepared foods
_____ Processed foods	_____ Flowers	_____ Plants
_____ Crafts		

BUDGETING FARMERS MARKET COSTS

Consider these costs when putting together a budget for selling at farmers markets:

ITEM	COST
CA Certified Producer's Certificate	
Farmers Market application fees	
Weekly farmers market fees	
Farmers market membership fees	
Fuel and labor for travel	
Pop-up tent	
Tables and chairs	
Table coverings	
Reusable crates, boxes, baskets and packing materials	
Scale, calculator and cash register or cash box	
Supplies for sampling (tongs, containers, gloves)	
Customer shopping bags	
Farm sign or banner & clamps to attach	
Farm t-shirts or aprons	
Pricing & info signs, chalkboard & chalk	
Labor costs for staffing farmers market stand	
Creating a web site	
Other	
Total Estimated Costs	

FARMERS MARKET ADVICE FROM DAVIS FARMERS MARKET SELLERS

In the sidebars on previous pages, advice offered by Davis Farmers Market sellers was edited to fit the space available.

Here is the unedited version of sellers' advice to new farmers.

“If you want to get into a successful market like Davis Farmers Market, you have to have great product. The best.

Be friendly, because you're going to meet a lot of people. You need to be able to talk, interact and ask and answer questions. I get a lot of questions. The goal is to communicate with customers.

Be prepared to get along with everybody at the market, even people who aren't very friendly.”

Lucas Boucher
Boucher Plants, Suisun City, CA
DFM seller since 2012

“Engage with your customers. Make eye contact with those walking by. Smile! Stay off the phone.

Offer free samples as best you can in conformance with market standards and regulations. Be generous.

Offer 'bulk' discounts. If someone wants a whole box or boxes, recognize that you won't have to invest as much time per unit to make that sale.

Boil your display down to as simple an exercise as you can. Nice looking for sure, but something that is easy to set up AND pack up and transport.”

Rich Collins
California Vegetable Specialties
Rio Vista, CA
DFM seller since 1989



“Maximize freshness. In the food biz, people feast with their eyes before they take the first bite. Know how to handle the crops to make them their most attractive and fresh-looking.

Scope out the markets you’re interested in and try to find something to produce that is not at the market, or is under-represented.

Commit to staffing your own booth. Farmers markets are educational institutions, not just commercial outlets. Market managers will appreciate you being present to respond to customer inquiries and comments, and to volunteer information and perspectives on farming.”

Jim Eldon
Fiddlers Green Farm, Brooks, CA
DFM seller since 1992



“Be honest and be consistent. Be reliable and be on-time at every market.

It takes a lot of work to sell at farmers markets. If you bring good quality, people will come back to your stand again.”

Luis Guevara
Rancho Mi Familia Fruit & Produce, Inc.
Santa Maria, CA
DFM seller since 1999



“The hardest working man I’ve known, who let me work at his farm in Central Illinois when I was a teenager, always said, ‘To be a farmer, you only need two things: a strong back and a weak mind.’

He was full of clever advice and while the strong back part is absolutely true for farming, he never sold vegetables at a farmers market so the weak mind part is dated.

A person selling at a farmers market needs a sharp mind capable of critical thinking, a sense of humor, integrity, ethics, an aesthetic vision, honesty and morals. I try to focus on my ten feet of stall space and try not to worry about what other farmers are doing.

Also, I want my customers to leave my stand feeling that they got a good deal on the best vegetables they can get. You have to be serious about quality and fair prices.”

Lloyd Johnson
Lloyd’s Produce, Davis, CA
DFM seller since 1999



“The most important thing is to visit a few farmers market to see if their atmosphere, sellers and shoppers are appropriate to your commodity.

We found that the farmers markets closest to our farm are most receptive. Shoppers there want to be able to stop by our farm—even though most never do. The fact that our farm is close by, and that they would be welcome to visit our farm, means a lot to them.

You have to remember that when you’re selling food at a farmers market, you are selling retail food. It is important to understand the rules related to food products and fresh produce to ensure that your product is safe because you have a lot to lose if your customers get sick.”

Dan Jones
Islote Farm, Esparto, CA
DFM seller since 2011

“Go to farmers markets and look for products that are missing or in short supply. Don’t try to come into a market with peaches or squash or something that’s really common.

Look for markets whose size will support you. Markets should be big enough to support your product. If you only go to one small market and expect to make a living, that’s probably not going to happen. If you sell at multiple small markets, or get into one or two larger ones your sales will be higher.

Connecting with customers is not about sales; it’s about education. A farmers market is farming for cooking. Be prepared to talk in depth about how to cook your products and be excited about it. If you don’t love to cook and eat what you grow, how can you share that enthusiasm with customers?

People are buying raw ingredients, and if there is a market seller who is excited, customers share that excitement. It’s important to have those conversations, and that shared experience of being excited about your food.”

Kristy Lyn Levings
Cache Creek Meat Company
Esparto, CA
DFM seller since 2009



“Know all about what you are selling: the name of the variety, its salient traits, how it differs from other varieties, its horticulture (irrigation, fertilizer, etc.), where to buy seeds or plants, how to cook your product, how to store it, etc.

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Yolo Bulb, Winters, CA
DFM seller since 1989

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Don’t use hand-held devices—cell phones, Blackberrys and such—when you are selling at the Market. The message you send customers is, ‘I’m too busy, I don’t need to wait on you.’ Sitting behind your stand is also a bad idea. If you’re too busy to stand during the market, you need to be somewhere else.

Price everything on your table in legible handwriting (use spell-check if you need to). Handwritten signs are fine. Customers do not like having to ask the price of everything. They’ll just move on until they do see a stand with prices displayed.

Be nice to your customers, even ones you don’t know. Many of those ‘first-timers’ have become my best customers.”

Dianne Madison
Yolo Bulb, Winters, CA
DFM seller since 1989

“Our philosophy has always been, the more variety you have, the better. That allows us to sell as much as we can to each shopper. It’s high management and more difficult to do, but all that variety pays off when you have a great display.

I think display is everything. Presentation is so important. You’re creating an art palette when you create your farmers market display. Make sure you have tablecloths, use contrasting colors, and pay attention to how you put things together.

I’ve always had a price chalkboard at the back of the van. But most customers are not looking up, they’re looking at produce. We used to handwrite prices on the tops of cardboard boxes and



set them next to the produce, but we ended up with a lot of trash because products and prices change from week to week.

Now we use very small chalkboards, which is easier and part of our décor.

Since you'll have different produce from week to week, you can't set up your stand the same way every time. It makes sense to have versatile produce chalkboards—so you can switch them, and change them.

I use 12-inch long 4x4's and 2x2's to prop up baskets, or to even out the way a box sits on the stand. We also use them to keep boxes level in the van during transport.

Get to know your customers' names, and be willing to chat and have real conversations with them. That's why people come to the market. They want that interaction with the farmer. That's why it's important that the farmer is the seller. It's an opportunity for the farmer to have an exchange with the customers. You need to be there yourself as much as possible."

Annie Main
Good Humus, Capay, CA
DFM seller since 1976

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