


Local



Appeal

Increase in fresh, locally grown produce connects farmers and consumers



WHEN IT COMES TO EATING locally grown fruits and vegetables, there is at least one rule of thumb to remember: The shorter the shelf life, the better the taste. That's one way Kelly Jackson of Daniels Produce assesses the foods her company sells through farmers' markets, roadside stands, wholesalers and retailers.

About 80 percent of the produce grown on the nearly 600-acre farm near Columbus is sold for distribution to grocery stores and large retailers like Wal-Mart, with sweet corn, cabbage and bell peppers being the primary vegetables.

But of the 20 percent that is sold directly to customers looking for fresh and local produce, watermelons, cantaloupes and tomatoes rule the bins. "We're planting varieties that aren't going to last very long, but they taste

amazing," says Jackson, daughter of Andy and Tannie Daniels, who own Daniels Produce. "Produce like heirloom tomatoes or Athena cantaloupes may only last four days, but they taste really good if you can get them to the market fast enough."

More and more people in Nebraska and throughout the country are embracing the idea of eating local produce, both for the fresh taste and the direct connection to the farmer growing the product. As a result, more farmers are looking at crops that are particularly suited for farmers' markets and roadside stands.

"There has been a large increase in the number of produce growers in Nebraska," says Casey Foster, ag promotion coordinator for the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA). "As demand has increased, so



STAFF PHOTO

have the number of outlets farmers are selling from. Most Nebraskans should be able to find a source of local, fresh produce, whether it be a farmers' market, roadside stand, U-pick operation or even at some grocery stores."

Foster says while actual figures are difficult to quantify, there are at least 600 growers, located throughout the state, who are registered with NDA, and the number of farmers' markets registered with NDA has grown from 39 in 2000 to 82 for the 2013 season.

NEW SALES OUTLETS

In addition to participating in farmers' markets, some growers in the state are starting or joining community-supported agriculture (CSA) groups, according to Ryan Pekarek, who owns Pekarek's

Produce in Dwight and is president of the Nebraska Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association.

"CSAs provide growers another outlet to sell their produce," he says. For a CSA group, customers sign-up with a farm to receive produce during the growing season. The customers pay an up-front fee for a "share" of the harvest, and receive produce from the farm as it comes in season and in amounts representative of the share purchased earlier.

"The customer shares somewhat in the risks involved in growing produce. For example, if the green bean crop fails for some reason, the customer gets no green beans from the farm that season," Pekarek says. "But many folks like the idea of that close relationship with the person growing their food."

While some growers move to CSAs, a few have found a new outlet in an area once difficult for growers to crack. Jackson, of Daniels Produce, says some growers have been able to get their product into large grocery stores.

"It used to be hard to sell to larger retailers, such as Wal-Mart," she says. "But now, this whole movement of buying local has really helped. There are a lot of opportunities to raise local produce because a lot of these larger grocery stores are jumping on the bandwagon of buying local, and I think they're trying to save on transportation costs by decreasing their imports from California and Mexico."

MARKETING EFFORTS

Foster says the NDA is working hard to help customers and produce growers connect. The department



Farmers' market shoppers purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from a produce grower. More than 80 seasonal farmers' markets are located throughout the state.

operates a marketing program known as "Nebraska Our Best to You," which is designed to advance the availability and benefits of Nebraska's agricultural food products, particularly fruits and vegetables.

The program's website, www.ourbesttoyou.nebraska.gov, provides details that are helpful to consumers seeking information on local produce. It includes a list, located by county, of farmers' markets, roadside stands, U-pick operations and produce growers. It also includes recipes, a harvest calendar and gardening tips.

NDA also works with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to administer the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program and the Women, Infants and Children's Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Qualified nutritionally at-risk low-income seniors, women and children use coupons to purchase fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables. The programs grow the market for farmers, while improving nutrition in specific low-income populations, Foster says.

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