

FARM FRESH: Farmers markets taking root on North Shore
The Salem News
June 27, 2008

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A growing number of people are taking up their mesh reusable grocery bags this summer and heading for the local farmers market.

Most of the fresh produce, herbs, cheese and fresh cut flowers come from farms in Western Massachusetts and Vermont, but growers from as nearby as Amesbury and Danvers also sell their harvest to North Shore markets.

It seems a new farmers market is cropping up every week, says Dave Webber, farmers market coordinator for the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources. In fact, the number of markets in Massachusetts has doubled since 2003 to about 160 and counting, says Webber.

This spring, the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources gave a \$300,000 grant to 36 organizations across the state for creatively marketing local agriculture. On the North Shore, over \$3,000 was granted for the multilingual promotion of the Revere Beach Farmers Market.

Newburyport is the most recent community in Essex County to start a new one, and Salem has one in the works for next summer.

"I think it's more of a movement than a fad," says Webber. "Once people start shopping at a farmers market, it's hard for them to go back to regular sources, especially for produce. The quality, the freshness and the taste is so much better."

It seems farmers markets are popular more because they sell locally grown food than organically grown. "Organic" is a popular buzz word these days, but just because a food label claims something was organically grown, it isn't always true. Some farmers markets work with farmers who use limited pesticides.

Many market managers say that with the economy and gas prices, people are more concerned about how far their food travels than how it is grown.

These outdoor markets are more than just a place to shop. They make us think about where our food comes from and make us feel good about doing something for the environment.

After all, buying locally grown food preserves open space, helps local farmers and makes a lighter carbon footprint, when the average meal usually travels 1,500 miles to our plates. Farmers markets are also good business for the farmer who can sell to city dwellers. Massachusetts ranked first in New England for direct sales of farm products to consumers last year, earning \$31 million. The state also ranks first nationally in value of average direct market sales at an annual \$24,900 per farm.

Research shows that farmers markets are also good economic tools for the hosting community. The Salem market, planned for Derby Square, would incorporate the exhibitors at Artist's Row, musical concerts and encourage downtown residents and tourists to not only eat locally, but to shop locally as well.

One hundred years ago, butchers and growers gathered below Salem's Old Town Hall to sell their goods. But with fears about food-borne illnesses, the logistics are more difficult than they once were.

Salem Main Streets Director Jennifer Bell attended a farmers market management workshop this past winter that focused on everything from publicity to conflict resolution. Bell is working with a group of volunteers, looking into the permitting for selling fresh fish and giving out free samples.

At the folksier Topsfield Fairgrounds, the 25-year-old market welcomes backyard growers who have a bumper crop of squash to off-load. Many of the crops are picked that morning, says director Jane Cook.

Salem resident Kristin Rodgers does her own gardening in one of Salem's community plots and says these small gardens could supply a Salem Farmers market. Rodgers says she wants to shop for fresh produce and baked goods each day, like in Europe, rather than food shopping for the whole week.

A teacher at Carlton Elementary, the city's green school, Rodgers has been talking up the idea of a farmers market to those who live, walk and shop downtown.

Food shoppers in Marblehead and Salem are becoming spoiled for choice. Farm Direct Co-op, a cooperative of 350 members, drops in both communities. Last year, the co-op worked with 21 farmers and nine cheese makers.

A new Community Supported Agriculture drop also begins this summer at Crunchy Granola Baby on Salem's Washington Street. Jennie Cudmore, who owns the natural fiber baby clothing store, plans to offer classes in canning vegetables and making baby food.

As director of The Food Project's North Shore site, Melissa Dimond has been involved in farmers markets in Lynn, Gloucester and Beverly. She says they are gaining popularity because, thanks to the booming industry of green marketing, people are figuring out how to dodge frozen tomatoes and tasteless berries, trucked to grocery stores from Mexico and California.

"As a culture, our food system has moved away from the way it used to be," says Dimond. "The more industrialized it gets, the farther away it comes from."

In Beverly, Dimond grows enough greens, peas, tomatoes and other crops on 2 1/2 acres to equate 120,000 meals a year. These are the kinds of facts customers love to hear at the Beverly Farmers Market each week.

These markets also build community. Take the Marblehead Farmers Market, for example, a popular Saturday morning gathering place behind the middle school, where folks can get a cup of coffee and peruse crafts, as well as exotic vegetables. The market features a different musician and a nonprofit organization each week.

"It has something to do with a social, local aspect," says market manager Don Morgan. "People see their friends. They are buying from people who are essentially their neighbors. I think they feel a connection."

Sometimes they feel the connection before they even enter the marketplace. For instance, shoppers at Chris Crandell's In Season on Salem's Essex Street place their order in a virtual shopping cart online and then pick it up on Saturday morning.

They feel connected through Crandell's blog, describing how he bought an old ice cream truck and started driving to farms. He shares the source of his milk in glass bottles, meat from small farms in Southern Maine, bread from Salem's A&J Artisan Bakers and dark gourmet chocolate from chocolate makers in Somerville.

By encouraging customers to add recipes and photos to his Web site, Crandell says he's trying to build a real community around fresh food lovers. He came from a finance background and says he's simply wrapping a good business plan around a product that people already want. He did a few drops in Salem last fall, but with the online pre-ordering he can control his inventory and encourage people to do most of their weekly shopping at his market. The average order, says Crandell, is now \$40.

"The whole reason I started this business is that I really wanted to be a part of effecting a change in something I believe in, and I really believe in small farms in New England," he says. "Not just giving them enough to survive on, but encouraging them to grow."

Crandell is growing. He's talking with Salem rickshaw companies about making deliveries and looking at other places to make weekday and weekend drops on the North Shore, as well as considering a drop location in Somerville's Davis Square.

Unlike the farmers markets where customers are interested in crafts and environmentalism, in Peabody, City Planner Blair Haney describes the city-run market held behind the courthouse as "no frills." This weekly market caters to low-income families by accepting WIC coupons.

"We're not like a Whole Foods market that caters to those who will spend an extra dollar on high-end items," says Haney. "Our customers are looking for the cost benefit of buying directly from the farmer."