

A hand is holding a bunch of fresh beets with vibrant green leaves and dark red roots. The background is a rustic wooden wall. The text 'FINDING YOUR MARKET' is overlaid in a large, white, outlined font.

FINDING YOUR MARKET

A CT FARMERS GUIDE TO SELLING THEIR FARM
PRODUCTS DIRECTLY TO CONSUMERS



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AN OVERVIEW OF DIRECT MARKETS FOR SMALL FARMS IN CT

There are several things to consider when searching for the best market for your local farm products. Which avenue can be the most profitable? Which is the best use of your time or your staff's time? Do you have the personality or staff to sell through this marketing channel?

Most small, diversified farms rely on more than one kind of direct marketing channel to supply the income needed to support their businesses. Just as a diverse crop plan can benefit a new grower figuring out their niche, a diverse marketing plan can spread out revenue and increase flexibility as crop conditions change throughout the season. It's also important to consider that all marketing channels will evolve from season to season along with your ever-evolving farm business.

Understanding your local market is the first step to finding your niche. Conduct a market analysis for your town or county to better understand who your potential customers might be. Try and learn more about the demographics of the area you plan to market to. If you have an established customer base already, getting to know them better is fundamental to figuring out how a new product will fit their lifestyle, interest, or needs. Social media analytics and Google Affinity categories can aid in researching information and trends online.

It's also helpful to be intentional about who your "ideal" customer will be. Identify key attributes and values of your target consumer to focus your marketing efforts and develop your brand. Not everyone is your customer, and focusing your time and energy on the people who will support your business is a critical step towards profitability.



Just as many growers find it draining to manage dozens of different crops in the field, they similarly find it draining to manage dozens of different marketing opportunities. New growers should try to find a balance between finding enough markets to sell all of your products, while being realistic about your ability to manage too many different opportunities. The best results will come from taking time to identify your personal strengths and the marketing opportunity that best matches those strengths, or the strengths of your staff.

This guide is certainly not a comprehensive list of all of the local marketing opportunities in the state, but a starting point for considering the most common sales outlets for small-scale food producers. The best marketing opportunities will come from thinking about who in your local community purchases and appreciates quality food. Finding your right niche will take time and consistent development, but there are ample marketing opportunities for new growers in the state of CT.



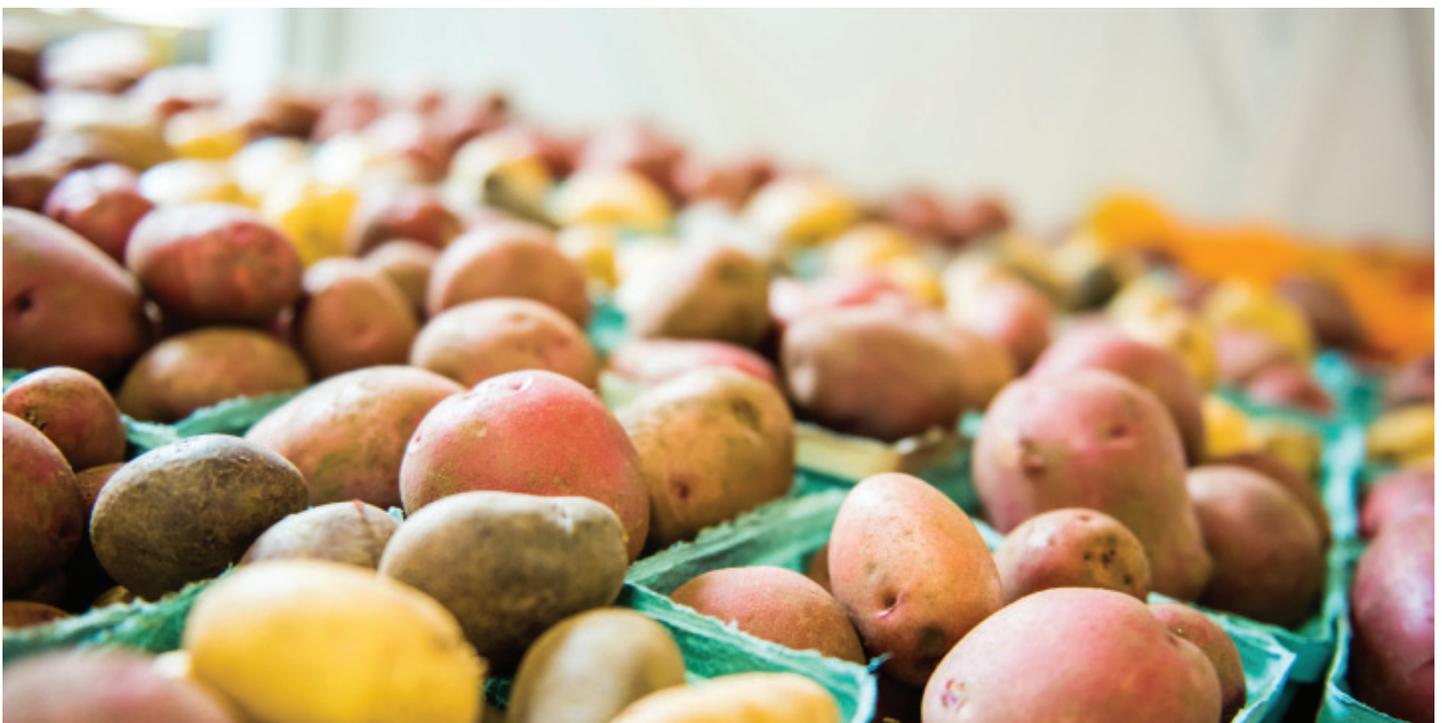
JOINING THE NEW CT FARMER ALLIANCE IS A GREAT WAY TO NETWORK WITH FELLOW NEW GROWERS IN THE STATE, AND REACHING OUT TO NEIGHBORING GROWERS IS THE BEST WAY TO GET AN IDEA OF THE MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES IN YOUR IMMEDIATE AREA.

The local market in CT has matured, but is not saturated. There is ample opportunity for creative new farmers to sell their farm products directly to consumers, but developing a marketing plan will take time and attention to detail. Good record analysis is essential for determining the most profitable markets for your farm business and making adjustments each season.

For many growers, certainty of sale becomes a top priority item of consideration, as overproduction on a small farm can be the difference between running a profitable business and consistently struggling to make sales. Growers that develop a crop plan around their marketing plan are being efficient with time and inputs. To best manage your harvesting schedule, many growers find it helpful to either: 1) have marketing opportunities spread throughout the week to keep product continually moving; or 2) develop a multi-tiered marketing plan.

"LEARNING HOW TO MARKET YOUR PRODUCE SUCCESSFULLY IS A LONG JOURNEY OF TRIAL AND ERROR. YOUNG FARMERS NEED TO CONSISTENTLY EVALUATE IF THE WAY THEY ARE MARKETING THEIR PRODUCE IS MAKING THEM MONEY. YOU CAN GROW THE MOST INCREDIBLE PRODUCE IN THE STATE, BUT IF YOU DON'T HAVE A DIRECT MARKET TO YOUR CUSTOMERS, YOUR FARM MAY NOT THRIVE. "

- LAURA MCKINNEY, RIVERBANK FARM





RESOURCES

UConn EXTENSION

FOODSAFETY.UCONN.EDU

NEWFARMS.EXTENSION.UCONN.EDU

CSA TOOLS

PUTLOCALONYOURTRAY.UCONN.EDU

FARM TO SCHOOL TOOLS

CTFARMRISK.UCONN.EDU

CT DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

WWW.CTGROWN.GOV

CT GROWN BRAND/LOGO IDENTITY GUIDANCE

CT FARM TO CHEF PROGRAM

FARM TO SCHOOL RESOURCES FOR FARMERS

A NOTE ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Each section of the guide outlines several of the biggest considerations in a chart to help you compare product diversity needed, customer interaction required, potential travel, price potential per item, and certainty of sale (rated 1 to 3).

One of the most important resources for new growers navigating the marketing process is the advice of experienced growers, and this guide was developed with input from some of Connecticut's best small, direct-marketing farmers.

In a multi-tiered marketing plan, for example, you may prioritize harvests for a CSA pick-up on Friday, then plan to take any leftovers or bumper harvests to the farmers' market on Saturday or reach out to chefs within your network for a one-time sale of a particular item. The goal in developing a diverse and detailed marketing plan is to sell as much product as possible while it is harvested at its peak, reducing the amount of food sitting in coolers or unharvested in the fields.

Managing the evolution of your marketing plan from season to season requires detailed record keeping. This allows you to make decisions based on sales and income for each marketing avenue, and make critical adjustments for the next growing season. Farm finance advisors emphasize the need to constantly evaluate for and eliminate sales channels that fail to pay for your time. Most experienced growers make annual adjustments to their marketing plan to maximize profitability.

"WE ARE BIG FANS OF RECORD-KEEPING. WE KEEP A LOG OF STARTING AND ENDING NUMBERS FOR EACH PRODUCT EACH DAY (AT MARKET). THIS INFORMATION HELPS US TO PLAN FROM WEEK TO WEEK AND ALSO FROM YEAR TO YEAR."

- RACHEL BERG, FOUR ROOT FARM

Regardless of the outlets you choose to market your farm products, it will be to your advantage to establish a farm website and social media presence, as well as have printed materials (brochures or business cards) to hand out to potential customers. Time and money spent investing in relationships with potential customers will pay off in loyal support and returning sales season after season.



SETTING UP A FARMSTAND

GROWERS WITH A FARMSTAND CAN BUILD A BASE OF REGULAR CUSTOMERS THAT ENJOY VISITING AT THEIR CONVENIENCE TO FIND FRESH, LOCAL PRODUCTS. WITH A GOOD LOCATION AND ATTRACTIVE FACILITY, GROWERS CAN USE THE FARMSTAND TO SELL THEIR OWN FRESH PRODUCTS AND VALUE-ADDED PRODUCTS, AS WELL AS PRODUCTS FROM NEARBY FARMS.



- WEIGHING THE OPTIONS -

ADVANTAGES

- Pricing is generally higher than wholesale and CSA streams.
- A well-established farmstand can move large volumes of produce in season.
- A well-designed farmstand with reliable offerings can offer convenience to a regular customer base.
- For growers with a farmstand close to fields or processing areas on a farm, a farmstand can limit the distance food travels and make it easy to oversee sales and staff.
- Connecting directly with consumers allows farm businesses to cultivate relationships. A farmstand can become an established landmark in the community.
- Farmstands provide an immediate audience that you can communicate with for feedback on your products.

"CONSISTENCY IS DIFFICULT, BUT VERY IMPORTANT. IF YOUR CUSTOMERS ARE COUNTING ON YOU AT CERTAIN TIMES/DAYS YOU HAVE TO BE THERE OR THEY WON'T COME BACK."

- HALEY BILLIPP, EDDY FARM

CHALLENGES

- Most growers find that consistent hours (multiple days and weekend days a week) and consistent staff are essential to farmstand success, and require a good amount of oversight to ensure cleanliness and other standards are being met.
- Location is key - most customers do not want to travel too far to access fresh food.
- Farmstands are more subject to inspection and regulation than other direct marketing options.
- Competition with the selection and consistency of the grocery store produce department requires consistent staff attention and stocking systems to maintain attractive displays.
- A good retail/cashier capacity (including credit cards/EBT/etc) is required.
- Adequate and convenient parking is necessary for customers to have the best experience possible. Access to restrooms also improves the customer's experience.
- Consumer education is constant and important. Customers will ask more questions at a farmstand than a grocery store and must understand seasonality, pricing, pest control, and a number of other factors that go into producing food.
- It can take time to get to know your customers and cater your growing and selection to best suit their needs and interests.
- Expanding selection (especially to include popular items like fresh baked goods) to satisfy customer requests can be a slippery slope. Customers will want supermarket selection, but most farmstands are unable to profitably replicate that business model.

ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- Do you have a structure to sell your farm goods out of and the infrastructure needed to keep your display looking fresh and organized?
- Does your town have any regulations or restrictions on farmstands?
- Does your town have any regulations or restrictions on signage?
- Does your location receive ample traffic?
- Do you have an area you can set up for parking?
- Do you have restrooms available for customers to use?
- Are you ready to take credit cards? Do you know how to set up a bank box and have backup cash if needed?
- Will you accept EBT?
- How many staff will you need to hire for the farmstand? Who will manage and train staff?
- Do you have a back up plan for when your product is not at peak marketability?
- Are you connected with other growers who you can work with to expand your selection or fill in gaps in your harvest when needed?
- Can you design and set up a space nicely to imitate the produce department in a grocery store?
- Are you able to create an "experience" for your customers? Some farmstands offer this through a kids corner, "assemble your own" bouquet or other offerings, or offering other local products to expand offerings.
- Do you have a good record keeping system established to track income and particularly cash sales? Do you have a way to calculate taxes for non-edible sales separate from produce sales?



REGULATIONS/CERTIFICATES

Each town has their own regulations and restrictions on the establishment/size/signage for farmstands, so you should visit your local town hall for details.

INSURANCE

Most insurance companies will require coverage on your building, as well as your farm products. If you sell products from another grower you will need additional general liability coverage.

COMPARING MARKETS

1 = LOW 2 = MODERATE 3 = HIGH

PRODUCT DIVERSITY NEEDED



CUSTOMER INTERACTION NEEDED



POTENTIAL TRAVEL



PRICE POTENTIAL PER ITEM



CERTAINTY OF SALE



FARMER-TO-FARMER ADVICE

“Don’t be afraid to retail other growers’ produce. It’s nice to offer items that you yourself do not grow to expand your market.”

- Haley Billipp, Eddy Farm



“Start with limited selection, but ample quantity and scale up from there. Keep it simple in terms of variety (simple red tomatoes instead of different types of heirlooms, one type of squash instead of three varieties of summer squash, one type of cucumber). People like what they know and are comfortable with: traditional offerings. Once they are familiar with your stand and the quality of product, they are more willing to try new things. The bottom line is to sell and move product so that you have happy customers and not rotting product. You want to make sure that your customer can depend on certain products always being at the stand. We found out this year that people love head lettuce. They want to know that any time they stop by the farmstand there will be head lettuce available and they won’t have to make two trips (one to the farmstand and one to the grocery store). Even though people embrace the idea of farm fresh food in a farmstand, they also are creatures of habit and want to know they can count on certain staple products being available any time they stop in.”

- Jane Meiser, Stone Acres Farm





ORGANIZING A CSA

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA) IS WHEN THE CONSUMER PURCHASES A SHARE OF THE HARVEST AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SEASON, PROVIDING THE GROWER WITH THE MONEY NEEDED UPFRONT TO SUPPORT THE FARM, AND IN EXCHANGE RECEIVES A WEEKLY SHARE OF THE HARVEST. OVER 110 GROWERS IN THE STATE SELL THROUGH A CSA PROGRAM TO SUPPORT THEIR FARM BUSINESS.



- WEIGHING THE OPTIONS -

ADVANTAGES

- Reliable income makes creating a farm budget easier.
- Upfront payment allows growers to purchase seeds and other supplies early in the spring when income from other revenues is limited.
- The community supporting a CSA provides a captive audience and reliable market for your produce, which makes crop planning efficient.
- A consistent customer base throughout the season and an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with members builds trust and loyalty.
- The majority of marketing happens during the winter “off-season,” rather than during harvest.
- On-farm CSA distribution requires less travel than other marketing channels.
- Innovative CSA models allow growers to create programs that best fit their needs, from farmstand discount programs to farmers’ market share programs.

CHALLENGES

- It can take time to figure out which vegetables, varieties, and quantities of food your members enjoy eating. Most appreciate a selection of familiar offerings, with a few interesting vegetables or varieties mixed in.
- Increasingly consumers are searching for convenience, which can make it challenging to lure customers to the farm weekly for on-farm CSA pick-up. Flexible pick-up options, times, and days can improve convenience for members.
- Consumer education requires weekly attention over the course of the season as members learn about how their food is grown, how it should be handled, and require cooking advice
- Members really want and expect to see the farmer (and not staff) at pick-up, and scheduling that time away from the fields can be difficult during the peak of the growing season.
- Customers can find it difficult to pay upfront for the full cost of the CSA, and managing payment plans requires extra attention.
- Customer retention is often the most challenging aspect of managing a CSA and requires growers to consistently seek feedback and work towards satisfying customer needs.
- Most CSAs require knowledge and management of multiple, if not dozens, of different crops, rather than specialization in one or two.
- Determining the right number of shareholders requires a balance between required income, available labor, and local interest in the CSA program, an aspect that will likely change from year-to-year.
- In spite of the underlying principle that CSA members share in the farmers’ risk, a crop failure of a high-value item (like tomatoes) can disappoint customers.

"REPUTATION MEANS A LOT IN HOW WELL YOUR FARM BECOMES PATRONIZED. IT ALL DEPENDS ON QUALITY AND RELIABILITY."

- ROB SCHACHT, HUNTS BROOK FARM

ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- What is the length of your growing season?
- Are you able to produce a variety of crops reliably each week during that season?
- Do you have the personality and time required to interact with your CSA members?
- Will you write a weekly newsletter and share recipes to help your members best understand your farm and utilize their share?
- Is your CSA contract worded clearly so that your members understand what happens if they miss a pick up, there is a crop failure, etc?
- How many families are you confident that you can feed and manage?
- Is there interest in your area in CSA programs? How will you market your program?
- Will you pre-pack your CSA shares? Offer the items market-style? Offer a pre-paid (debit) market program where members can choose what they would like? Customers increasingly seem to prefer a choice or selection over pre-boxed shares.
- Where and when will you distribute your shares? Can you improve convenience by distributing at a local business, church, office, or school?
- Can you, as the farmer, be at each CSA pick-up to connect with members and answer questions?
- Will you offer any share add-ons, such as eggs or flowers or meat, to expand your farm's selection?
- Will you utilize any season extension techniques to offer a CSA program in the winter, early spring, or late fall?



REGULATIONS/CERTIFICATES

CSA programs remain largely unregulated, but it is advised to contact a lawyer with any questions regarding the development or enforcement of a CSA contract. The CT Department of Labor should be consulted when “work-shares” (voluntary labor in exchange for a portion of a CSA share) are involved.

INSURANCE

Most insurance companies will cover on-farm CSA sales through general farm product insurance, but may require a general liability policy to cover items purchased from other businesses to supplement farm shares.

COMPARING MARKETS

1 = LOW 2 = MODERATE 3 = HIGH

PRODUCT DIVERSITY NEEDED



CUSTOMER INTERACTION NEEDED



POTENTIAL TRAVEL



PRICE POTENTIAL PER ITEM



CERTAINTY OF SALE



IN 2017 THE AVERAGE CSA PRICE FOR CUSTOMERS IN THE STATE WAS \$31/WEEK WITH A MAX OF \$50/WEEK AND A MINIMUM OF \$12.50/WEEK.

THE AVERAGE CSA SEASON IN CT RUNS FOR 16-20 WEEK (JUNE THROUGH OCTOBER), WITH A NUMBER OF FARMS EXTENDING THE SEASON EARLIER IN THE SPRING AND LATER INTO THE WINTER.

FARMER-TO-FARMER ADVICE

"CSA is dependable. Knowing the demand in advance can make you much more efficient in what you grow. Often times CSA members are devoted customers to your farm and they can do some of the sales for you by referring friends. We have also had tons of support from our customers: everything from volunteering, loans of trucks, trading of services and so on. You can get more than just a customer when you sell a share."

- Baylee Rose Drown, Upper Pond Farm



"CSA is great because even when it rains you still make money."

- Susan Mitchell, Cloverleigh Farm

"Make sure you farm for a year and figure out how to do that first! Don't start a CSA until you figure out how to grow everything with consistent yields."

- Kerry Taylor, Provider Farm

CONDUCT A MEMBER SURVEY DURING THE PLANNING SEASON.

- What products do your customers want?
- When are the best times for them to pick up their share?
- What is their motivation behind joining a CSA?
- How often are your members cooking at home?





BECOMING A FARMERS' MARKET VENDOR

WITH OVER 140 FARMERS' MARKETS IN THE STATE, EVERY DAY OF THE WEEK, FARMERS' MARKETS OFFER GROWERS A WAY TO SELL THEIR PRODUCTS DIRECT TO AN ENTHUSIASTIC GROUP OF CONSUMERS.



- WEIGHING THE OPTIONS -

ADVANTAGES

- Farmers' markets are a great way for new farmers to introduce themselves to a community. You can meet fellow growers, advertise a CSA, connect with chefs, and more.
- A skilled Market Master takes care of drawing customers to the market, limiting the amount of advertising and promotion the farmer needs to do.
- There are markets all over the state and every day of the week, making it easy for growers to incorporate market attendance into a schedule of restaurant or CSA deliveries, for example.
- You can build reliable, supportive, regular customers through a farmers' market.
- The farmers' market can be a great place to test out new varieties or new products and hear direct feedback.
- Farmers' markets offer a convenient way to sell food to low-income communities, through the use of WIC & SFMNP checks, EBT, and coupon doubling, all which are becoming increasingly common.
- There is a potential to make a lot of money in a relatively short amount of time.

"BY FIGURING OUT HOW TO SELL MORE AT OUR MARKETS, WE CAN INCREASE REVENUE WITHOUT INCREASING EXPENSES, SINCE WE WOULD SPEND THE SAME TIME AND LABOR ON EACH MARKET NO MATTER HOW MUCH PRODUCT WE MOVE."

- RACHEL BERG, FOUR ROOT FARM

CHALLENGES

"MARKETS ARE FICKLE AND HARD TO PREDICT. THEY ARE ENTIRELY WEATHER DEPENDENT, AND IN A RAINY YEAR CAN BE A DIFFICULT WAY TO SELL YOUR CROPS."

- CHARLOTTE ROSS, SWEET ACRE FARM

- Compared to other marketing ventures, farmers' markets can be too time consuming when you factor in the time needed to travel, set-up, and disassemble your display each week.
- Weather can affect market attendance, making it difficult to plan for a reliable income over the course of the season.
- Not all farmers' markets attract customers looking to purchase raw ingredients to cook with; several focus on prepared foods and craft vendors, which can negatively impact sales for growers.
- Competition with other vendors can be challenging.
- Farmers' markets require a good deal of customer interaction
- finding the right personality to staff your market can make a difference in sales.
- It can be difficult to get into an established farmers' market, but also difficult to build a solid customer base at a new farmers' market. Every farmers' market is unique: what is a great fit for one farm may not be the best option for you.
- It's difficult to predict how much product will sell each week, and maintaining an abundant/attractive display often means leftovers.

ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- How many vendors are there at the market you are considering joining?
- What percentage of vendors are farmers vs. artisans and prepared foods?
- What is the average number of customers per market day? Is there a seasonal customer base (ie summer beach traffic)?
- Is there a Market Master that is paid/employed? Is this person a vendor?
- What is the vendor fee for the season or as a guest?
- What does the vendor fee go to?
- Does the market accept WIC & SFMNP checks? Credit Cards?
- Does the market accept EBT and/or are coupons doubled?
- What is the focus of the market? (i.e. is it a place where folks buy their weekly fresh food, do people come for dinner at food trucks, are there weekly events?)
- What day of the week and time of day is the market?
- What kind of space do you use (town green, side street, main street, parking lot, etc)?
- What is the typical type of customer?
- What have sales been like at the market over the lifetime of the market?
- When was the market established?
- Can vendors keep their vehicle with them?
- Is the site visible?
- Does the market master send an 'end-of-season' survey?
- Who has ownership of the market? (town, state, or 501(c)3)
- Is the market producer only?
- What is the vendor turnover rate? How many seasons do most of your vendors participate in the market?
- Are vendors required to stay for the duration of the market if they sell out?
- Do you have a tent, coolers, and other supplies needed to maintain product quality during the heat of summer?

questions compiled by Susan Mitchel, Cloverleigh Farm, and the New CT Farmer Alliance



COMPARING MARKETS

1 = LOW 2 = MODERATE 3 = HIGH

PRODUCT DIVERSITY NEEDED



CUSTOMER INTERACTION NEEDED



POTENTIAL TRAVEL



PRICE POTENTIAL PER ITEM



CERTAINTY OF SALE



WINTER FARMERS' MARKETS

With over 15 Holiday and Winter Farmers' Markets across the state, options are expanding for growers interested in extending their growing season.

REGULATIONS/CERTIFICATES

The CT Dept. of Agriculture has regulations for producer only markets, particularly in regards to signage and traceability. Individual markets may require different certifications and paperwork as part of their application.

INSURANCE

Most farmers' markets require \$1 million dollars in coverage for market sales, and a certificate listing coverage for each market.

FARMER-TO-FARMER ADVICE

"Get to know your customers and be able to give them that 'know your farmer' experience. Be ready to talk with people! They may have questions about your growing practices, how to cook your produce, how far you traveled to be there, etc. We think it's important to give customers time and attention in order to help them connect with the local food movement and become better educated, dedicated consumers. When you're busy that can be hard to do, but the pay-off of dedicated customers that show up every week is well worth it."

- Charlotte Ross, Sweet Acre Farm

"Farmers' markets give the best price for your produce, but there is competition, and it can be unpredictable. Having a consistently good display and brand will help. Make friends with the other farmers - you can learn a lot!"

- Baylee Rose Drown, Upper Pond Farm

"In addition to growing beautiful and delicious food, our main focus is presentation. We work very hard to have a dynamic display that draws in customers visually. There is not one right way, but our display is characterized by strategies like multiple tiers, chalkboard price signs and conscious color placement. We believe it is important that at least one person at each market regularly works on the farm so they can confidently answer questions about our growing practices and how each vegetable can be prepared. One of the amazing things about farmers' markets is the direct access that customers have to those who grow their food."

- Rachel Berg, Four Root Farm

"You are paid for your display at the farmers market. Edges on table enable you to make bountiful piles of produce at the farmers market. Always work to create beauty and bounty for your stand. Customers come to the market because they want delicious produce and they want a connection with the person who grew their food. The more you create a connection with your customers (through social media, conversation or displays at the market), the more they will return. If marketing is something you do not enjoy, hire someone to take on this task, it is important."

- Laura McKinney, Riverbank Farm



PROCESSING AND SELLING A VALUE-ADDED PRODUCT

FROM JAMS TO PICKLES, PRODUCING A VALUE-ADDED PRODUCT CAN EXTEND THE USE OF PERISHABLE FARM GOODS, AS WELL AS EXPAND SELECTION IN YOUR MARKET.



- WEIGHING THE OPTIONS -

ADVANTAGES

- Value-Added Products are a way to use excess or imperfect product and reduce waste.
- You can extend the shelf life of perishable produce (ie. strawberry jam that stores for longer than fresh berries).
- There is growing interest and availability in commercially run kitchen spaces, making it possible to produce value-added goods without the upfront cost of building a kitchen. This can be a great way to get started and develop a product before investing in expensive on-farm infrastructure.

"MAKING JARRED TOMATO SAUCE WAS ONE OF THE EASIEST DECISIONS BECAUSE I DID NOT HAVE A MARKET FOR THE FRESH PRODUCT. WITHIN DAYS I PICKED 900 POUNDS OF TOMATOES, HAD A COPACKER PROCESS THEM, AND GOT BACK OVER 50 CASES OF A HIGHLY PERISHABLE PRODUCT STORED IN JARS."

- SUSAN MITCHELL, CLOVERLEIGH FARM

- Add products to your farm's offerings or develop a niche market with an innovative product.
- Co-packers in the state make it possible to sell farm-grown sauce and salsa without doing it all yourself.
- Cottage Food Laws may make it possible for growers to produce and sell certain products on farm.

CHALLENGES

- Value-added production requires more certification than most other marketing streams. In addition to producing a safe product on-farm, depending on the product you are producing, you may need ServeSafe certification, Better Process Control School, or even a Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) course.
- Determining the true cost of developing a value-added product takes time. Consider processing, labeling, testing, packaging, marketing, labor, etc.
- The processing of most value-added products takes place during peak harvest time, making it challenging to balance a busy workload.
- It can be challenging to learn all of the laws that pertain to your product and navigate the process of product creation.
- There is a lot of science that goes into making value-added products that are safe to eat. Understanding the chemical process of your specific products is essential to proper preservation and can require consulting with experts and researchers outside of the agricultural community.
- Depending on the value-added product you are producing, you must carefully monitor food safety risk, including the risk of introducing pathogens, allergens, or other hazards involved in the production of your product. Detailed record keeping and management is required for traceability after products have been distributed. These systems must be kept separately from agricultural records, increasing the amount of paperwork to keep track of.



ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- What market exists for your product? Is there competition?
- Will the value of your product exceed the cost of processing?
- Does it make sense to make the products yourself or would it be better to use a co-packer?
- Do you want to build and manage a commercial kitchen or is there another community kitchen/licensed facility available in your area?
- What are the potential food safety risks with your product? What pathogens could be a problem in your process or product? How will you control for these hazards?
- What conditions on your farm could increase the food safety risk in your food processing facility?
- Do you have the time or staff required during harvest season to be processing farm goods for value-added production?
- Have you contacted the Dept. of Public Health and Local Health District to learn about the specific food safety regulations for your product?



REGULATIONS/CERTIFICATES

Most food processing falls under the jurisdiction of the CT Dept. of Consumer Protection. All food processors must have a license to process.

INSURANCE

Additional insurance coverage is needed to cover the production of your product, depending on the scale and scope of your marketing.

COMPARING MARKETS

1 = LOW 2 = MODERATE 3 = HIGH

PRODUCT DIVERSITY NEEDED



CUSTOMER INTERACTION NEEDED



POTENTIAL TRAVEL



PRICE POTENTIAL PER ITEM



CERTAINTY OF SALE



FARMER-TO-FARMER ADVICE

“When you don’t quite have markets for your produce lined up, you can end up with excess, often highly perishable, product. By processing it into a value-added product you can quickly convert a potential loss into potential income. But then you have even more income tied up in a shelf-stable product that you still have to find a market for.”

- Susan Mitchell, Cloverleigh Farm



“Make sure that the product you are creating is a unique, stand-out product - something that is not already available. Making value-added products from your surplus produce allows you to extend your sales season, filling up your stand throughout the year with products that are only available seasonally otherwise. Even in the winter months our farmers’ market table has tomato products that are local, not conventional or from the super market. People want that!”

- Steve Munno, Massaro Community Farm

CO-PACKERS AND COMMERCIAL KITCHENS AVAILABLE FOR USE BY SMALL FARMERS:

- CLiCK, Willimantic
- Palmieri’s, New Haven
- Spark MakerSpace, New London

Occasionally breakfast restaurants or other restaurants not serving all day will rent out kitchen space. Network with chefs in your area to see if this is a possibility.



SELLING TO RESTAURANTS

WITH THOUSANDS OF RESTAURANTS AROUND THE STATE
FEEDING CONSUMERS EACH DAY,
RESTAURANTS ARE CAPITALIZING ON THE FARM-TO-TABLE
MOMENTUM AND SOURCING MORE LOCAL FOODS.



- WEIGHING THE OPTIONS -

ADVANTAGES

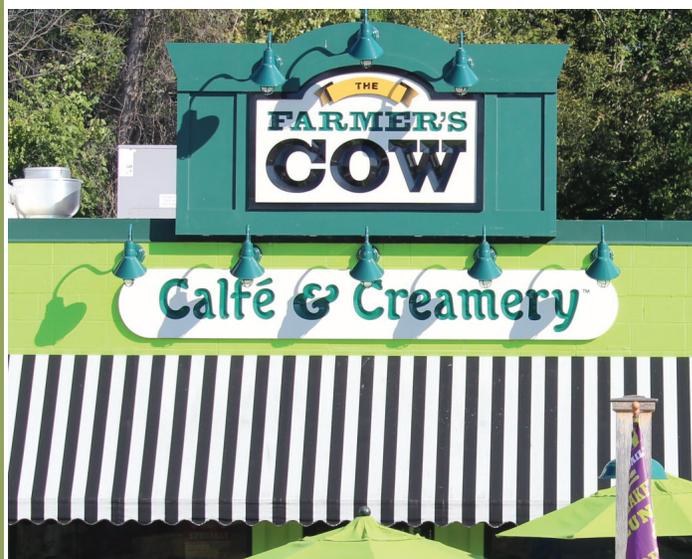
- Farm-to-table dining experiences are popular and many restaurants are interested in featuring locally grown food on their menus.
- Chefs generally order food each week, to fit their menu and anticipated customer volume, making it possible to sell occasionally to a restaurant if you are interested in wholesaling excess crops in lieu of developing a relationship based on regular sales.
- Most restaurants are open year-round and can provide a steady demand for your product in the off-season.
- Many chefs that work with local farmers have constantly-evolving menus and are open to trying new and interesting products throughout the year.
- The CT Dept. of Agriculture sponsors a CT Farm-to-Chef week each September, which can be a good way to expand the reach of your marketing for no cost.

"ONE OF THE BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH RESTAURANTS IS GETTING YOUR NAME ON THE MENU AND A LITTLE BIT OF FREE PRESS. HOWEVER, IT CAN BE CHALLENGING TO BALANCE ORDER SIZE (CAN TEND TO BE ON THE SMALL SIDE), DELIVERY AND PAYMENT TERMS TO MAKE SURE IT ALL WORKS FOR THE FARM."

-TOBY FISCHER, GENTLE GIANT FARM

CHALLENGES

- Though there are thousands of restaurants in CT, there are only a few chefs that work with fresh food, and even fewer who truly prioritize sourcing locally.
- Chefs are often following the newest trends and developing new menus; it can be difficult to develop a long-term relationship with a chef. A strong relationship with a chef requires time and attention.
- It can be difficult to find a restaurant that will place consistent or reliable orders.
- Restaurants don't generally use large quantities of food. Growing primarily for restaurant sales can require managing lots of small orders, deliveries, and invoices.
- Most restaurants expect delivery, which requires time or staff to manage.
- Wholesale prices can be lower and disappointing to growers used to direct retail prices at farmers' markets.
- Sometimes chefs indicate on their menus that they are buying from you long after they have stopped placing orders.



ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- Which restaurants are in your delivery area and have chefs that value fresh or locally grown foods?
- How do the chefs you work with prefer communication? (ie. weekly email, texting, phone call, etc)
- What can you produce economically that chefs are interested in using?
- Are you able to meet with chefs during the planning season to grow the varieties and quantities of food they are interested in using?
- Can you meet with a chef at your farm to help strengthen their connection to you and build a stronger business relationship?

INSURANCE

Most insurance companies will cover sales to restaurants under general farm liability insurance.

REGULATIONS/CERTIFICATES

Many restaurants are highly regulated by the local health districts, so attention to food safety is of the utmost importance.



COMPARING MARKETS

1 = LOW 2 = MODERATE 3 = HIGH

PRODUCT DIVERSITY NEEDED



CUSTOMER INTERACTION NEEDED



POTENTIAL TRAVEL



PRICE POTENTIAL PER ITEM



CERTAINTY OF SALE



TIPS FOR ENTERING THE RESTAURANT MARKET

- 1.) Seek out restaurants that are busy and use fresh foods on their menus. They don't have to be currently advertising they cook with local food, but in general it is easier to work with independently run restaurants than large chains.
- 2.) Make a good first impression and bring samples if you have them available. Plan to arrive at the kitchen during a slower time (not peak dinner service, for example) and to leave your contact information. If possible, visit with chefs during the off-season (for most CT restaurants this is in the winter) to learn about their potential needs. Inviting them to your farm can help to strengthen their connection to your products.
- 3.) Make it easy for chefs to communicate with you. Ask what is their preferred means of communication and send over a simple, easy-to-read product list with prices for standard units at the same time each week (many chefs place weekly orders with a food distributor at the same time each week and you'll want to reach out to them before they have ordered all of their food.)
- 4.) Support the businesses that support you. Eating at restaurants that buy from you will help you better network with chefs.

FARMER-TO-FARMER ADVICE

"Building relationships with chefs is the key to successful restaurant sales. It's best to have a dedicated person on your staff who is the consistent contact person for your restaurant accounts. Things change quickly in the restaurant business - menu, seasonality, chef turnover - so being in constant communication allows you to know what's new and what's needed."

"Season extension can also deepen relationships with restaurants. The longer you can supply produce throughout the year to a chef, the less that chef will be looking to other farms or distributors for their orders."

- Steve Munno, Massaro Community Farm

"Chefs are unlikely to initiate a relationship with a new farm supplier, especially if you are starting a brand new business. Don't hesitate to pound the pavement, show up in the kitchen during prep with a sampling of your produce, and force your foot in the door. Aim for restaurants with realistic expectations for seasonally available produce, or speak with chefs about featuring your food on their specials menu."

"Speak with chefs in the offseason to incorporate vegetables and varieties they want into your production plan. Consider establishing minimum order values for delivery and a weekly restaurant delivery day to streamline the process, from harvest to delivery."

- Will O'Meara, Wadingfield Farm

CHEF-TO-FARMER ADVICE

"Have patience when working with restaurant kitchen staff and don't expect enormous sales. Once the relationship is established make sure you are providing the restaurant with only the highest quality product. They can be very picky. Be consistent and reliable as this helps with orders. Also, find products for restaurants that they can't get in other places. You want to make the experience and the relationship unique."

- Oyster Club Restaurant



SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS ARE AN EXCELLENT WAY TO CONNECT WITH THE YOUNGEST CONSUMERS IN THE STATE AND THE NEXT GENERATION OF BUYERS. WITH 30+ DISTRICTS IN CT PLEDGING TO "PUT LOCAL ON YOUR TRAY," THE FARM TO SCHOOL MOVEMENT IS GAINING MOMENTUM.



- WEIGHING THE OPTIONS -

ADVANTAGES

- Selling to individual schools, and forming those relationships is similar to restaurant accounts. If you are selling to restaurants it is an adaptable model.
- Building a good relationship can facilitate the ability to “move” bumper crop surplus at a decent price.
- There is a rising demand for local foods in schools; it is a growing market that you can grow with.
- Opportunities for extended marketing for your CSA or market stand through school sales can widen your scope of contact plus add visibility.
- Complex, formal bids are typically not necessary. Schools are able to procure directly from a farm through informal bidding and “Micro-purchase agreements”, a simple, non-competitive process that can favor geographic preference.
- Farm-to-school builds the social capital and relationships necessary to grow a healthy agricultural community. These are your future customers!
- Price points, while lower than retail, can still yield a reasonable return when selling larger volumes.
- There are several parent groups and community-based non-profits working in partnership with schools to increase their farm to school programming, so the opportunity to sell to a school is reinforced and actively pursued by these allies.
- The CT Dept. of Education and UConn Extension have a “Put Local on your Tray” Program to encourage more purchasing of corn, apples, winter squash, beans, kale, beets, potatoes, cucumbers, greens, zucchini, carrots, berries and dairy products.

CHALLENGES

- Food Service directors are as busy as you and, at opposite times of the year. Patience is required to establish a strong relationship.
- Schools usually expect delivery, which is not very different from the expectation to deliver to restaurants, drop off CSA boxes, or drive to a farmers markets. (Farms can set a minimum delivery amount and a miles/time limit to establish reasonable expectations with schools.)
- Post harvest handling needs to be high quality, relatively clean, somewhat sized and with consistent quality. Clear communication about product is key.
- The price points can be lower than retail pricing.
- Farm to School activities are not happening in every district.
- Developing a contract with schools requires planning since monthly school menus are typically developed at least six weeks in advance.
- Most school lunch programs have the greatest need during the school year, September - May, which may require adjustments to your crop plan if you are used to growing during the summer.

“SCHOOLS HAVE TO BE ENGAGED AND INTERESTED. HOOKING UP WITH OTHER PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED CAN HELP MAKE THAT CONNECTION STRONGER. BUT IT CAN BE CHALLENGING BECAUSE SCHOOLS ARE REALLY BUSY, SO IT’S HARD TO NAIL DOWN THE PROCESS AND FLOW.”

- KERRY TAYLOR, PROVIDER FARM

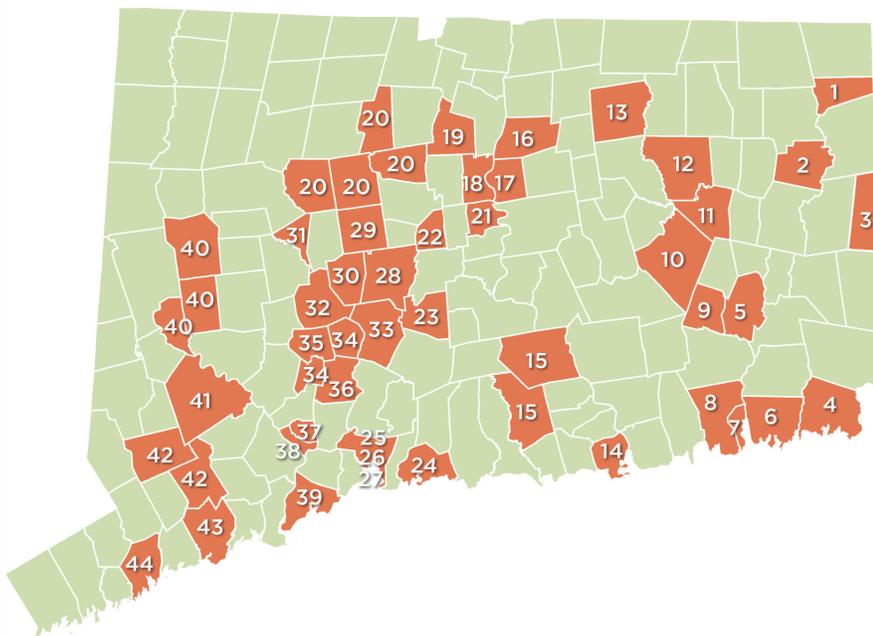
ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- Is the food service director of the school system you are approaching interested in purchasing local foods?
- Are you able to work with a school food director that is planning monthly menus six weeks in advance of the harvest and sale of your product?
- Are the school kitchens equipped to process and handle fresh food?
- Is there an item that you specialize in that you can grow well and reliably?
- Do you have the means to efficiently grow, harvest, and wash large quantities of a single crop?
- Do you have an understanding of the cost of production of the crop you are marketing to schools to be sure that you are covering your costs?
- Are you able to produce crops that are most commonly used by local schools during the school year calendar?
- If invited, would you be willing to visit the school to meet students or cafeteria staff?
- Are you willing and able to host a school field trip?

2017-18 SCHOOL DISTRICTS PURCHASING FROM LOCAL FARMS

KEY

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Putnam Public Schools | 24 Branford Public Schools |
| 2 Brooklyn Public Schools | 25 East Rock Community Magnet School |
| 3 Sterling Community School | 26 New Haven Public Schools |
| 4 Stonington Public Schools | 27 Highville Charter School (New Haven) |
| 5 Norwich Public Schools | 28 Southington Public Schools |
| 6 Groton Public Schools | 29 Bristol Public Schools |
| 7 New London Public Schools | 30 Wolcott Public Schools |
| 8 Waterford Public Schools | 31 Thomaston Public Schools |
| 9 Bozrah Public Schools | 32 Waterbury |
| 10 Lebanon Public Schools | 33 Cheshire Public Schools |
| 11 Windham Public Schools | 34 Region 16 School District: Prospect |
| 12 Mansfield Public Schools | Region 16 School District: Beacon Falls |
| 13 Tolland Public Schools | 35 Naugatuck Public Schools |
| 14 Old Saybrook Public Schools | 36 Bethany Community School |
| 15 Regional School District 17: Haddam | 37 Ansonia Public Schools |
| Regional School District 17: Killingworth | 38 Derby Public Schools |
| 16 South Windsor Public Schools | 39 Milford Public Schools |
| 17 East Hartford Public Schools | 40 Region 12 Public Schools: |
| 18 Hartford Public Schools | Washington |
| 19 Bloomfield Public Schools | Region 12 Public Schools: Roxbury |
| 20 Avon Public Schools | Region 12 Public Schools: Bridgewater |
| Canton Public Schools | 41 Newtown Public Schools |
| Regional School District 10: Burlington | 42 ER9: Easton & Redding Public Schools |
| Regional School District 10: Harwinton | 43 Fairfield Public Schools |
| 21 Wethersfield Public Schools | 44 Norwalk Public Schools |
| 22 New Britain Public Schools | |
| 23 Meriden Public Schools | |



REGULATIONS/CERTIFICATES

Small growers (less than \$500,000 per year) that sell directly to school districts will not need federal GAPs certification. Most larger farms will need to comply with GAP/FSMA guidelines for safety if sold through a distributor.

INSURANCE

Most insurance companies will cover sales to public schools under your general farm liability policy.

COMPARING MARKETS

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CUSTOMER INTERACTION NEEDED



POTENTIAL TRAVEL



PRICE POTENTIAL PER ITEM



CERTAINTY OF SALE



FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR-TO-FARMER ADVICE

"My advice to a farmer starting in the world of farm to school would be to start small. The forethought to make a contract with a farm to supply a large amount of product happens later. That's not where we started. It all started with doing 1 taste test a month. We built relationships with the farmer over time. The key is finding the wants of the food service director, the wants of the farmer, and meshing the two to make it happen. I also think there is definitely leg work up front; our Food Services Director was all about just trying it and making the extra effort to do so, to see where it led us. That push in the beginning to try a new way of doing things is key, and has potential to lead to longer lasting relationships.

Our contract with Hunts Brook Farm started small. We just reached out to the closest farms to start buying small quantities via the micro purchase procurement method. We would get small quantities of certain products for taste tests, and from there, we kept buying small quantities the following year. After about two years of doing this, we turned this into a contract for one product that we could guarantee we always needed and the Hunts Brook farmer could supply."

- Lucy Lyman, School Garden Nutrition Coordinator,
Food Services Department at New London Public Schools

FARMER-TO-FARMER ADVICE

"We were fortunate. We were in the right place at the right time when New London Schools were just starting to put out contracts. Between New London and Groton we sell 400 heads of green leaf lettuce a week in the fall. If you can figure out a system for it, you can move a lot of product through the schools. It's a relatively simple stream."

- Rob Schacht, Hunts Brook Farm

"Breaking into wholesale direct (better prices than conventional wholesale but not as high as direct retail...) with schools can be a perfect opportunity to scale up production of a few key products you excel at growing. The key is to start forming a relationship with a school food service director at a school near your farm. Communicate regularly, be responsive and grow your market. Selling to schools doesn't always mean regular huge orders, with micro-purchasing agreements small, regular sales can build your ability to scale up in this market."

- Shannon Raider-Ginsburg, Put Local On Your Tray

"In my experience, you can give schools a large amount of produce all at once: I can send them 800 pounds of beets and they will take them. It's not at a premium, but that's okay with me because they are taking large quantities. It helps if you can talk ahead of season to figure out what crops the schools are taking, because they won't take everything. It's really important to figure out how they do their purchasing, and have a good communication line."

- Kerry Taylor, Provider Farm

THE FEDERAL MICRO-PURCHASE THRESHOLD IS \$3500 FOR SINGLE PURCHASES FOR FEDERALLY FUNDED CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS. MUNICIPALITIES MAY HAVE A LOWER THRESHOLD THAT COULD APPLY. THE SCHOOL FOOD SERVICES DIRECTOR WILL KNOW WHICH THRESHOLD APPLIES.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bidding: an offer to set a price by an individual or business, used to determine the cost or value of a product or service, used often by farmers in sales to schools or institutions

Brand: who are you, what makes you unique, and how do you convey yourself to others

Co-Packer: a company that packages and labels a product for their clients

Commercial Kitchen: an equipped business kitchen set up and managed to pass the requirements of the local health department, used to prepare food for resale (such as a restaurant or caterer)

Cottage Food Law: the CT cottage food law allows farmers to sell jams, jellies, and acidified foods produced in an uninspected farm kitchen with produce grown on farm and to sell those products directly from the farm or farmers' market

CSA: Community Supported Agriculture, when the consumer purchases a share of the harvest at the beginning of the season, providing the grower with the money upfront needed to support the farm, and in exchange receives a weekly share of the harvest.

Direct-to-Consumer: when farm products are marketed and sold directly to the person consuming them, or in the case of restaurants and schools, to the chef preparing them for consumption

EBT: Electronic Benefit Transfer is an electronic system that allows state welfare departments to issue benefits via a magnetically encoded payment card

Farmers' Market: a gathering of farmers and other vendors in a neutral location to sell their products directly to consumers

Farm Stand: a building, usually located on-farm, used to sell farm products directly to consumers

Food Safety Training: a variety of courses and workshops that teach the best practices for managing food safety.

Market Master: the individual that organizes and runs a farmers' market

Procurement Process: the guidelines and regulations of school nutrition programs for obtaining food from farmers

Producer Only: farmers markets where all farm vendors agree to sell only products grown on their farms

Put Local On Your Tray: a farm-to-school program helping CT schools serve and celebrate regionally grown food

SFMINP: the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program provides low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for fruits, vegetables, honey, and fresh herbs purchased at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and CSA programs.

Social Media: websites and other online means of communication that are used by large groups of people to communicate information and to develop contacts

Value-Added: the process of transforming raw farm products into other salable items, increasing their worth

Wholesale: the sale of farm products in quantity to a retailer for resale

Work-Share: an agreement between a CSA member and a farmer to exchange farm products for labor on the farm

WIC: a special supplemental nutrition program for low-income Women, Infants, and Children

NOTES

UConn

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE,
HEALTH AND NATURAL
RESOURCES

EXTENSION

**A PROJECT OF UCONN EXTENSION
MADE POSSIBLE BY USDA BEGINNING FARMER AND RANCHER
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM GRANT #2016-25416**



THIS GUIDE WAS ASSEMBLED, WRITTEN, AND DESIGNED BY ALLYSON ANGELINI,
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PHOTOS ARE BY CHRIS NATCHWEY PHOTOGRAPHY, IDLEWILD PHOTOGRAPHY, AND MOLLY DEEGAN PHOTOGRAPHY.

FOR THEIR CONTRIBUTION OF SUCCINCT DIRECT MARKETING WISDOM, SPECIAL THANKS TO BAYLEE ROSE DROWN AT UPPER POND FARM, CHARLOTTE ROSS AT SWEET ACRE FARM, HALEY BILLIPP AT EDDY FARM, KERRY TAYLOR AT PROVIDER FARM, JANE MEISER AT STONE ACRES FARM, LAURA MCKINNEY AT RIVERBANK FARM, LUCY LYMAN AT NEW LONDON PUBLIC SCHOOLS, OYSTER CLUB RESTAURANT, RACHEL BERG AT FOUR ROOT FARM, ROB SCHACHT AT HUNTS BROOK FARM, SHANNON RAIDER-GINSBURG AT PUT LOCAL ON YOUR TRAY PROGRAM, SHARI STAEB AT EAST HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS, STEVE MUNNO AT MASSARO COMMUNITY FARM, SUSAN MITCHELL AT CLOVERLEIGH FARM, TOBY FISCHER AT GENTLE GIANT FARM AND WILL O'MEARA AT WALDINGFIELD FARM.