Vegetarian Newsletter

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Eat your Veggies!!!!!

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Demand for Locally Grown Produce Increasing

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Consumers of fruits and vegetables are much more demanding these days. No longer satisfied by just having access to plenty of produce at a reasonable price, consumers now want to know how it was grown and in many cases, even who grew it. Their concerns include safety, taste, freshness, nutritional benefits and a growing interest in retaining profitable local farms. These recent developments are providing small farmers with some rare opportunities to increase production and sales.

These opportunities could not have come at a better time. Currently small to medium sized farms are struggling to survive as production costs have increased almost 12 fold from 1965 to 2008, while the farmer received an increase of only 1.5 times during this period. Diesel fuel alone has increased from 15 cents per gallon in 1965 to over $4 per gallon today.

Though the old saying “if you don’t have it, you can’t sell it” holds true, marketing continues to be the greatest challenge faced by small farmers. Santa Rosa’s approximately 35 producers of fruits and vegetables have traditionally sold their produce through the local farmers’ markets or at the farm.
However, public demand and the work of farmers and supporting organizations have resulted in additional marketing opportunities. Other marketing options currently being explored include:

**U-Pick**

Though this is a tried and true method in many areas, it has not been a popular method of marketing by most Santa Rosa growers. This is beginning to change as more urban customers are becoming interested in the on-farm experience. One blueberry grower is allowing customers to “pick on the halves”. This saves the direct cost of hiring berry pickers while he retains half of the harvest for retail sales.

**Local “Big Box” Sales**

The large, national chain stores have recognized the popularity of fresh locally grown produce and are working toward supplying that demand. Local farmers can now sell their fruits and vegetables to the Pace Wal-Mart as Team Santa Rosa has secured a vendor identification number or VIN and have created the “Panhandle Fresh” program. Arrangements have also been made that will enable local growers the option of marketing their produce to Sysco Corporation, a major food service provider and distributor.

**CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture)**

We are lagging far behind many other areas of the country in providing CSAs to meet the local demand. Potential customers are calling and visiting the local Extension office asking how they can sign up with a local farm. This unique method of marketing spreads the investment risk for the farmer by having customers purchase a “share” of the upcoming crop. Produce is then provided based upon the cost of the share and the amount produced during a particular season. A great idea but so far, CSAs have not caught on in West Florida. It’s only a matter of time………

**References**

strawberries and onions harvested in early May and waiting for a trip to the market.