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Recipe for a great farmers' market

By **Nina Planck**

I've been selling at farmers' markets since 1980, when I was nine years old, and running markets since 1999. Over the years, I've talked to hundreds of customers, market managers, and farmers about how to improve farmers' markets.

Improve them for what or whom?

At the farmers' markets we run, our goal is simple: to help more farmers sell more local foods to more people. That may seem obvious. But all too often, managers get muddled about market goals. They say, for example, that farmers' markets support sustainable agriculture, promote healthy foods, and bring business to local merchants.

And so they do. But let's get the

cause and effect straight. These benefits of farmers' markets are secondary. Our primary goal—I repeat—is to help more farmers sell more local foods to more people. When we do that, the other benefits follow—and, happily, they follow reliably, like goslings imprinted on mother goose.

It doesn't matter, by the way, how your market is organized. The Mount Pleasant Farmers' Market in Washington, D.C. is managed by my non-profit (Local Foods) while my company in London is for-profit. Both organizations have the same goal, and the way we operate—rules, fees, publicity—is very similar.

Of course, we're always working to improve our markets—not least because in both cities we compete with other managers for sites, producers, and customers. When a new idea comes up, we ask: will it help more farmers sell more local foods to more people?

continued on page 4



The DuPont Circle Farmers' Market in Washington, D.C., is shown above, with the Farmhouse Flowers display in front. Nina Planck says the market is "near perfect," with a good site, high-quality and diverse products, and plenty of customers.

Inside

Pottiputki planting tool.....	6
On-line ordering systems.....	7
Thermal curtains	9
2005 index.....	10
Lettuce production.....	12
More on bird flu.....	15
Becoming a tourist farm.....	16

Letter from Wild Onion Farm

Signs of hope

We had a great year on our farm, with timely rains, successful crops, avid markets, and one of the highest net incomes we've ever tallied. So we enter this winter season of rest with tremendous gratitude.

Even if we hadn't had such a good year, we would be counting our blessings. Any complaints we might have had would seem petty compared to what farmers elsewhere in the country endured in 2005. The hurricanes that obliterated the Gulf coast, the drought in many other parts of the country, the rising price of everything, especially gas and heating oil, made this a singularly bad year for farming.

But even in the worst-hit areas, there are signs of hope. New Orleans, just a few months ago thought to be uninhabitable for the foreseeable future, is coming back. The Crescent City Farmers' Market there opened two days before Thanksgiving, with 26 vendors in attendance. Some of the farmers whose crops blew away in Hurricane Katrina are being trained as "deputies" to go out and provide "technical triage" to other storm-battered farmers and fishers, to connect them with available resources and assistance. The international Slow Food organization is working to provide seeds and other supplies to farmers in the region. Many other groups with an interest in farming are working to help food producers get back on their feet.

I'm sure that for those involved in these efforts, the

work just seems like survival, like putting shoulder to the plow and doing what needs to be done. From a distance, though, the responses of farmers and consumers in the South seem like rays of hope, statements of optimism, at a particularly dismal time in our lives.

We all are involved in acts of optimism, on our own farms. Whatever kind of season we have just come through, we greet the new seed catalogs with interest and a feeling of excitement. We reinvest in our farms, building and repairing. We explore new ideas, new markets. We always look forward to the next year.

As the editor and publisher of Growing for Market, I feel especially grateful to be part of those acts of optimism. For 15 years, GFM has been bringing new ideas to market farmers across North America. I hope to continue doing so for many years to come. I couldn't do it without you, the faithful readers of this publication. I thank you for the articles you write and suggest, for your words of encouragement, your gift subscriptions to friends, and of course, your renewals every year.

May your winter holidays be full of the satisfaction of a job well done, and dreams for a better year ahead.

Lynn Byczynski
Editor and Publisher

P.S. I'll be at the Great Plains Vegetable Growers trade show in St. Joseph, Missouri, January 12-14. (See the ad on page 14.) Stop by the Growing for Market booth and introduce yourself. Or drop me a note sometime this winter with your ideas for articles. Let me know how GFM can serve your needs.

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News briefs

Free seed search

The Save Our Seed project is an organic seed sourcing service that accepts organic “wish lists” from growers and replies to them with a list of dealers that sell the seeds they want. Conversely, if no organic seeds are available for an item on the list, the project will provide documentation of this that would be suitable to show to certification agents. The project lists information from 66 organic seed dealers.

The service is available for free throughout 2006. To use the service, growers seeking organic seed can send a list of the organic seeds they are seeking to Cricket Rakita at sourcing@savingourseed.org, or by going directly to the web site www.savingourseed.org and clicking on the “sourcing” button. Requests can also be mailed to 286 Dixie Hollow, Louisa, VA 23093. Appropriate information to include when requesting a search is variety, type, quantity sought, and/or maximum days to harvest.

Farm-built coolers

Two publications from USDA describe how to build inexpensive coolers for produce and flowers. One, called the Portacooler, is designed to be transported to the field for harvest. It includes information on wiring a regular home air conditioner to allow for lower temperatures. The Portacooler publication was the source of the farm-built cooler described previously in *Growing for Market* and in the book *The Flower Farmer*. The Portacooler is available on the web at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/MSB/publications.htm#Postharvest>.

The second publication is about building a stationary walk-in cooler. It is not yet available on the web. Printed copies of both publications are available from Jerry Berney at 202-720-8050 or by emailing Dan.Schofer@wdc.usda.gov.

Obesity, produce prices

Young school-age children who live in communities where fruits and vegetables are expensive are more likely to gain excessive amounts of weight than children who live in areas where fruits and vegetables cost less, according to a RAND Corporation study.

“These findings may help explain the growing obesity epidemic among children over the past 20 years,” said Roland Sturm, a RAND senior economist and lead author of the study. “During the same time period, prices of fruits and vegetables have increased faster than other food prices, and faster than the cost of living.”

The study, published in the medical journal *Public Health*, found no significant relationship between children's excess weight gain and the presence of many convenience stores, full service restaurants, limited service restaurants (primarily fast food restaurants), or grocery stores near their homes. Advocacy groups have suggested that such a link might exist.

The authors examined the weight gain of 6,918 children from 59 metropolitan areas around the United States over the time the children advanced from kindergarten through third grade. The researchers then compared the weight gain figures with the relative price of fruits and vegetables in each of the areas studied.

On average, children everywhere gained more weight than they should have according to clinical growth charts. But children who lived in metropolitan areas where fruits and vegetables were relatively more expensive gained significantly more weight than similar children living where fruits and vegetables cost less.

For the region with the highest relative price for fruits and vegetables — Mobile, Alabama — children gained about 50 percent more excess weight as measured by body mass index (a ratio of height to weight) than children nationally. Among children in the area with the lowest relative cost for fruits and vegetables — Visalia, California — excess BMI gain was about half the national average.

Market reopens

On Tuesday, November 22, the Crescent City Farmers Market in New Orleans reopened with 26 vendors and several thousand shoppers. Ralph Paige, President of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, presented \$200 grants for lost income provided by Farm Aid and Oxfam-America, a total amount of \$5,000.

For the foreseeable future, the CCFM will operate only on Tuesdays and only at one location - the most densely populated neighborhood in post-Katrina New Orleans. The market organizer, Loyola University's Economics Institute, has taken stock and reinvented itself in light of post-Katrina realities. For starters, it will operate under a new name: marketumbrella.org.

Richard McCarthy, executive director of the organization, said: “Since Hurricane Katrina, we've had the opportunity to reexamine our many activities and figure out which are truly the most meaningful. Clearly our mission—to promote ecologically sustainable economic development—is more essential than ever. It's also clear, however, that we need to serve the needs and address the realities that currently exist—not simply rebuild our capacity to address the ones we once knew.

“If New Orleans customers could benefit from products and services beyond fresh fruits and vegetables—such as key-cutting, mobile screen-repair, peer counseling, stress reduction, dry-cleaning drop-off, or tools and hardware—we might create a different kind of market: A Useful Market, so to speak.”

McCarthy says that a willingness to be flexible, to work collaboratively, and to reinvent regional infrastructure to fit current regional realities—not remembrances of things past—will be crucial to the speed and viability of the rebuilding effort.

Farmers' market...

continued from page 1

Note: it doesn't have to do all three at once. If half our customers buy twice as much from the same ten farmers, we're happy. If customers who once bought only fruit and vegetables now also buy milk and meat, great. If we open a second site with the same farmers, fabulous.

I see a lot of farmers' markets close up, warts and all. Some, like the Dupont Circle Farmers' Market in Washington, D.C., are near perfect. (That's not one of mine, by the way; it's run by FreshFarm Markets.) Like Tolstoy's happy families, all good markets are alike: with a good site, good producers—that means quality, diversity, and competition—and good publicity, the people will come. Before long, they are addicted to local foods. How can these perfect markets improve? By opening another site.

Unlike Tolstoy's unhappy families, failing markets tend to have similar problems. Typically, they need better producer-only rules; better farmer recruitment (especially meat, poultry, dairy, and eggs); better marketing (and less kvetching) by farmers, and more customers. All of these are best achieved by independent, professional managers—a conviction I've shared with GFM readers before.

In 25 years of market shop talk, I've heard every suggestion for improvement—a bigger site, more prepared foods, coffee, Friends of the Market, frequent buyer clubs, live music, radio ads, matching stalls, more education about local foods, tote bags. Dear reader, I have also tried most of them. All these ideas are fine, but much less effective than the basics I've mentioned above, and some (sorry, tote bags) probably do nothing for sales. Our view on publicity, by the way, is conservative: we have found nothing better than signs and leaflets. (Yes, I know chef demos are more fun.)

Perhaps the least important fix, in terms of sales, is in bricks and mortar—that is, the market site itself. We run fantastically successful markets in the homeliest places. In those forgotten parking lots, the main thing I want to see is farmers and customers—preferably lots of both.

Yet market managers dreaming big often ask me about the design of market sites. On balance, I think the manager's time and energy are better spent on other things, but if you can persuade the mayor or architecture school or business association to design a site for the market—and pay for it—more power to you. In London, we worked with the local council to custom design a market site, only to lose the lease to a phony 'farmer-style' market. In New York City, Greenmarket is working with the Parks department to redesign its flagship site at Union Square. That's good news for Greenmarket farmers and New Yorkers.

Let's suppose I did get lucky, and a fancy urban planning firm offered to design a market site. Here's my wish list:

- Open, flat, vehicle-accessible. No lines, marks, wires, fences, bollards, trees, or benches in main market area
- Access to electricity to sell chilled foods conveniently and hygienically. Ideally, outlets would be flush to the ground, spaced throughout the market, enclosed by small trap doors you can drive over. (Short of that, we use extension cords.)
- Grommets (metal loops), on a hinge but flush to the ground,

to hold tarps down in windy weather

- Seating near the market. William Whyte taught us that public spaces are more popular when there is ample, diverse seating
- Permanent signs and banners at the market. This kind of visibility outside of market hours is vital.
- A little shed or lockable storage unit for the manager's table, signs, etc.
- Fantasy feature: A small basin or fountain with running water for filling water jugs, washing sticky fingers and other minor washing-up. You see them at outdoor markets in Europe.

What I hope is clear from this list is its brevity and simplicity. Minimalism is the ideal. One wants very little clutter interfering with parking and stalls—or with other activities on other days.

I don't recommend building permanent, or even mobile, stalls. Let each producer bring his own set-up; the lamb lady has different needs than the apple guy. Matching stalls are not only unnecessary and expensive but—how shall I put this?—too much. Twee, as the Brits would say. Customers are on the ground, looking at the food, not up in hot air balloons, gazing down upon striped awnings. Unique stalls are part of the pied-beauty charm of farmers' markets.

continued on the next page

Pottiputki tube planter

A manual plug planter designed for the forestry industry is being used for vegetable and flower transplants. Called the Pottiputki tube planter, it is a Swedish tool for planting tree seedlings, but adaptable to any other kind of transplants.

Roger Styer, owner of Country Fresh Flowers in Batavia, Illinois, recommended it after using it one season.

"Planting into the field was much easier with the Pottiputki tube transplanters I purchased," he wrote. "In fact, I transplanted all the plants myself, with no bending over needed."

The Pottiputki is available in several diameters from 43 mm to 73 mm to accommodate different plug sizes, and it's recommended that you choose a size 10 mm larger than the plug size. The tube is about 3 feet long.

To operate, you push the tube into the ground and step on a pedal to open the jaw, then drop the plug into the top of the tube, and lift with a twisting motion to set the plant firmly.

The Pottiputki is imported by BAP Equipment Ltd. in Canada, www.bapequipment.com; 800-561-3600. The price is about \$200 Canadian.



Farmers' market...

continued from page 4

What about cover? At many established markets that are open all year in tough weather, managers and farmers dream of cover. Sometimes I think this reflects market psychology: specifically, a desire for respect in the form of a permanent structure. Markets are transient creatures, like circuses—and that gives us an inferiority complex.

But think twice before plotting to put a roof over your head. Like seasonality, being open-air is in the nature of farmers' markets. Moreover, cover is expensive; few farmers' market can afford it. That's why many indoor markets need high-paying tenants selling chocolate and olive oil. Farmers' markets don't have the sales of a food hall, and probably never will. Why burden them with infrastructure they can ill afford?

But Nina—I hear the objections already—with sales of only \$1 billion out of the \$500 billion Americans spend on food, farmers' markets are too small! They need to expand and serve more people. How true. If we want to develop the farmers' market system further, here is my to-do list:

- Leave markets outdoors;
- Radically improve market management, as above;
- Fund farmers' markets with producer fees;
- Find more meat, poultry, dairy, eggs & fish producers;
- Convince municipal governments to streamline permits and make public property available for farmers' markets so we can double the number of sites.

At the same time, we need to increase the sales of local foods grown with ecological methods—I call them slocal = slow + local—beyond retail farmers' markets. That means selling to shops, grocery stores, chefs, schools, prisons, corporate America, and the White House mess hall. But that's another column.

© Nina Planck, November 2005

Nina Planck created London Farmers' Markets, which runs 13 farmers' markets in London, England, in 1999. (www.lfm.org.uk) She was director of Greenmarket in New York City in 2003. Bloomsbury will publish her next book, Real Food, in 2006. (www.NinaPlanck.com)

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