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**8 Tips for Beginner Farmers’ Market Vendors**

If you’re new to selling at farmers’ markets, survive your season with these business-minded tips.

*By Lisa Kivirist*

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| Farmers' market vendor *Courtesy Jupiterimages/Brand X Pictures/ Thinkstock* If selling at a farmers' market for the first time, figure out a niche that will set you apart from the other vendors. |

Perhaps you planted those first seeds with a goal of feeding your family, but as with many farm projects that start small, gardens can quickly blossom into a much larger endeavor. When your neighbors start locking their doors for fear of more covert zucchini deliveries, perhaps it’s a sign to start selling your bounty at farmers’ markets.

You won’t be alone in embracing[farmers’ markets](http://www.hobbyfarms.com/crops-and-gardening/farmers-markets-14777.aspx). According to the USDA, as of mid-2010 more than 6,100 farmers’ markets operated throughout the U.S., a 16-percent increase from 2009. With continued interest in local foods, shoppers find farmers’ markets the best opportunity to “know your farmer” and bring healthy, fresh food to their family’s plate.

But as with any farm-based venture, selling at a farmers’ market should be a well-thought-out, strategic part of your farm-management plan. Here are some tips to get started:

**1. Do Market Research**  
Ideally, you’ll identify a potential farmers’ market the year before you want to start selling and visit it several times during the season. Get a feel for the market and attendance flow. Is there enough shopper volume to justify more vendors?

“Every market has its own culture and vibe,” explains Leigh Adcock, executive director of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network, an organization connecting women in sustainable agriculture. “Some markets cater to busy shoppers who want to quickly buy their week’s vegetables while others create a more social setting with music and kids activities. Talk to other growers and folks buying at the market to get a sense of what the market is like.”

**2. Learn Farmers’-Market Rules**  
Understand the regulations of the particular farmers’ market you’re considering selling at. Ask the market manager questions, and make sure you can commit to the expectations. For example, you may inquire about rules regarding what you can sell. Some markets are “producer only,” which typically means you can only sell things you grew yourself, whereas others may allow you to resell other items or include things like [crafts](http://www.hobbyfarms.com/crafts-and-nature/crafts-topiclist.aspx).

**3. Start Small**  
Don’t go overboard—test the farmers’-market waters before investing in expensive tents and gear. See if you can find a market where you can sell as a “daily vendor” to get started. These are markets that will let you commit to one market at a time depending on available space. This way, you can get a feel for selling at the farmers’ market without over-committing. As you do these trial sales, take into account your driving time and costs and sales volume to determine if this particular market is a good long-term fit.

**4. Identify Your Niche**  
How is what you’re selling different than other vendors at the farmers’ market? Sometimes it helps to specialize in selling varietals of one distinct item, such as [garlic](http://www.hobbyfarms.com/crops-and-gardening/growing-garlic-14978.aspx). Another route is to creatively package your items. Sure, a lot of farmers may be selling red, ripe tomatoes, but what if you sold green tomatoes, along with your recipe for fried green tomatoes?

**5. Design Your Stand**  
“Plan your stand ahead of time, and even do a ‘dry run’ rehearsal and set things up at home before your first market,” advises Blue Strom of Shady Blue Acres. Strom sells at the Dane County Farmers’ Market in Madison, Wis., the largest producer-only market in the country.

“Colorful tablecloths and clear signage go a long way in showcasing your product and increasing sales,” she says

**6. Get Organized**  
Develop a system for organizing, transporting and setting up your product at the farmers’ market.

“Keep detailed checklists of all the little things you’ll need that easily are forgotten, such as small bills and coins to make change, weights for your tent in case it gets windy, and even extra clothes to prepare for weather changes,” says Larry Johnson, manager of the Dane County Farmers’ Market.

**7. Be Personally Prepared**  
Take along water and snacks, and prioritize a good night’s sleep the evening before, especially if you’re selling at an early-morning market.

“Nothing like a grumpy farmer first thing in the morning to decrease sales,” Strom says with a laugh. “It’s important that everyone selling at the market put their best cheery face forward, as this helps the market develop a reputation as a friendly, fun place to shop.”

**8. Build Relationships**  
Share information about your farm with your customers. Connect them with where and how your items were raised. Bring in photos and your favorite [recipes](http://www.hobbyfarms.com/food-and-kitchen/default.aspx).

Connect with other farmers at the market, too, particularly at the end of the day when there’s the “second market” going on: A lot of informal bartering happens between farmers at this time.

***About the Author:****Lisa Kivirist writes from Inn Serendipity, her farm and bed-and-breakfast in Wisconsin, which is completely powered by*[*renewable energy*](http://skimlinks.pgpartner.com/mrdr.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fskimlinks.pgpartner.com%2Fsearch.php%2Fform_keyword%3Drenewable%2Benergy)*and specializes in local, seasonal, organic cuisine. She is co-author of the award-winning book* ECOpreneuring *and* Rural Renaissance *and the cookbook* Farmstead Chef*.*