

Farmers interested in selling directly to consumers have many strong options in Washington State. Direct marketing strategies require the farmer to think about all aspects of marketing such as displays, signage and informational materials, and how to create eye appeal to attract shoppers. Six of the most viable direct marketing options are summarized in this fact sheet. Benefits and challenges are listed for each of these options.

This fact sheet includes:

- farmers markets;
- farm stands;
- U-Pick;
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA);
- Internet sales and mail order; and
- agri-culinary tourism.

We would like to thank Karen Kinney for reviewing this fact sheet and offering helpful suggestions.

Farmers Markets

Farmers markets may be a fantastic place to start marketing your products. With more than 140 farmers markets in Washington, they are often very accessible. For a small fee, producers buy space to market their goods at a market that is well-advertised to consumers. Most markets are run by a manager and are accountable to a board of directors. Vendors often have an opportunity to be part of the board.

Presentation, booth design, and signage are important in attracting customers. Offering samples to customers at farmers markets can be a key step to selling your delicious products. Sampling regulations fall under local health department guidelines and may require a food handler permit. Many markets offer special events such as chef demos to help promote product sales.

Benefits of Selling at Farmers Markets

- Farmers markets are unbeatable for customer feedback on your products.
- A good place to test new products, get feedback and get new ideas.
- Often well-attended, they can offer very high volume sales.
- You can develop a loyal customer base.
- Opportunity to become known to the public and media and expand your business.

Challenges of Selling at Farmers Markets

- Picking the right market that matches your products, growing season, and volume is critical.
- Takes you away from the farm for hours or days at a time; incurring opportunity costs.
- May have to travel some distance for maximum sales.
- There are no guaranteed sales; bad weather or competing events may keep customers away.
- It may be difficult to access space in well established markets.

To find a directory of farmers markets, contact the Washington State Farmers Market Association at www.wafarmersmarkets.com, email info@wafarmersmarkets.com, or call (206) 706-5198.

WSDA has created the **Washington State Farmers Market Manual** to help existing markets run better, and new markets begin. It is available online at www.agr.wa.gov/Marketing/SmallFarm/docs/FMM1.pdf.

The Governor proclaims Washington State Farmers Market Week for the first week of August to celebrate Washington farmers and farmers markets. Many markets hold special events for customers during that week.

Farm Stands

Farm stands can be on your farm or by a roadside and can be as basic as the bed of a pick-up truck full of melons or a seasonal shed full of apples. Farm stands can be as elaborate as a year-round, air-conditioned store with refrigerators, freezers and prepared foods. Farm stands can be unstaffed, honor pay systems, or staffed. The system you choose will have a direct connection on the cost of the product you sell. Farmers selling on-farm should factor in the savings from not having to deliver the goods. As staffing costs can hinder a farm stand's viability, consider being open only when there is regular demand. Advertise well, and follow any local zoning regulations for signage, so that passersby see that you are open and have time to stop safely.

Benefits of Selling at Farm Stands

- Allows for flexibility because you control the market, days and times open; can be very effective as a seasonal outlet.
- Opportunity to sell a single product or a variety of products.
- Good opportunity to sell odd shapes and sizes, and seconds.
- No sizing or grading needed.
- Limited packaging, labeling, and transportation required.

Challenges of Selling at Farm Stands

- May take you away from your farm tasks or be expensive to staff.
- Sales can be unpredictable with traffic flow.
- May have increased insurance liability as people come on to your farm.
- Possible zoning, building permit, or other licensing requirements.
- Adequate storage or refrigeration may be needed to maintain quality product.

U-Pick

In Washington, U-Pick is an option primarily for flower, tree fruit, berry, pumpkin, and Christmas tree growers. U-Pick farms should be aware of the liability risk of having consumers come onto the farm. It is a good idea to research liability insurance and waivers before opening to the public. Be sure to offer a clean site for visitors with parking, restroom facilities, and rules, container options and prices outlined clearly to ensure the best experience. U-Pick farms can be a community meeting place and they are also a great family activity. U-Pick farms have tourism appeal, too. Consider advertising your U-Pick farm with roadside signage, farm map listings, or the Washington State Tourism website found at www.experiencewa.com.

Benefits of Selling U-Pick

- Allows for flexibility because you control the market, days and times open; can be very effective as a seasonal outlet.
- Opportunity to market a single seasonal crop.
- Keeps packaging, labeling, transportation, and harvesting costs to a minimum.
- Potential to develop a loyal customer base that returns year after year.
- Potential to market additional farm products to local and visiting U-Pick customers.

Challenges of Selling U-Pick

- Increases your risk as people come onto your farm and liability insurance may be difficult to find or costly.
- May incur damage or lose some product in fields or farm from customers.
- A location far from a population base or urban area can limit customer access.
- Advertising is crucial; your website and marketing information must be accurate and up to date so that customers get correct information, including the current status of your crop.
- Staffing for managing the operation.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

A CSA is an agreement between a farmer and a customer. The farmer provides their customers with a share of the harvest for a fixed period of time. Farmers can design their CSA so that customers pay in advance or in installments for a weekly box or bag of farm products. Since members of the CSA pay in advance, it provides working capital directly to the farm. Many summer CSAs offer produce throughout the growing season and cover 18 to 24 weeks. In addition, Washington farmers are also using CSAs to market their grains, cheeses, eggs, meat, fiber and produce year-round, as well as value-added products.

Most CSAs include a weekly newsletter of farm happenings, a list of what's in the box, and recipes for items in the box. CSAs advertise by word of mouth, brochures, and web sites to solicit customers. CSAs utilize more of a grassroots marketing venue as members often host pick up sites where farmers drop a group of customers' boxes at one location. Many CSAs offer pick-up at the farm.

In Wenatchee, Farmhouse Table CSA buys products from numerous local farms and puts them together in order to create the variety desired by CSA customers. In Clark County, there are more than twenty CSA farms operating on five acres or less. See www.swwa-csafarms.com.

Benefits of Selling through CSAs

- Pre- sales allow you to plan production and have a secure market for your harvest.
- You set the prices and choose quantities to put in the box.
- An excellent CSA builds a loyal customer base.
- Provides an opportunity to educate CSA members about new varieties and products.
- Does not require individual packaging, grading/sizing, and minimizes transportation.

Challenges of Selling through CSAs

- Requires a complex crop mix and production plan to be able to deliver consistent, quality products every week.
- Farms must dedicate time to responding to individual customers' needs, complaints, and praises.
- It takes time to manage and write the weekly newsletter and/or recipes, and a willingness to share personal stories.
- A high turn over of CSA customers can increase marketing costs.
- Farms need to arrange and manage pick up locations.

Internet Sales and Mail Order

Internet sales and mail order are a valuable way to reach customers throughout the U.S. with unique, seasonal, and value-added products. Many Internet sales items work well as gifts, treats for self, or hard to find, specialty items. Value-added food products that you ship are required to be processed in a licensed WSDA Food Processing Facility. Accepting online payment is important for this market.

Blue Bird Grain Farm offers Internet sales of their products such as a monthly CSA of grains, and gift baskets. See <http://shop.bluebirdgrainfarms.com>.

Benefits of Selling through Internet and Mail Order

- Mail order can be cost-effective for smaller deliveries and keeps the farmer on-farm and off delivery routes.
- Reaches a larger customer base, especially if farm is not located close to a large population base.
- Can link and be linked to other websites of like minded groups to access more customers.

Challenges of Selling through Internet and Mail Order

- Need to communicate well with your customers by going the extra mile and including package inserts, email confirmations, or phone follow-ups.
- A reliable, user-friendly website is essential to online sales.
- Getting frequent return sales may be difficult. Think of ways to provide high value and make your product special.
- Can be difficult to establish your web presence without other forms of direct selling to help publicize your name and products.

Agri-Culinary Tourism

Agri-culinary tourism can boost your revenue by offering an on-farm educational, dining, lodging, or cooking experience to consumers. With culinary tourism and interest in local food and farms on the rise, think about what you can offer the eco or agri-tourist who seeks an authentic farm experience. Whether a school field trip, cheese-making, beverage and food pairings and tastings, a cooking class, or guided harvesting, composting and seed-saving classes, and even wool carding, many options exist that appeal to consumers. It helps to advertise well and get non-refundable deposits for classes. Be sure to charge for your planning and class or tour time. Consider working with a local chef for classes on your farm or at their restaurant. Local regulations, permits, land use and building codes can make the start up time and monetary costs very expensive. Make sure to check with your local government permit departments to find out what is required very early in the planning process.

Benefits of Agri-Culinary Tourism

- Can diversify farm revenue and supply income in the slow season.
- You set the prices and choose the number of people to allow in activities.
- Offers an opportunity to sell other products once people are on your farm.
- You can build a loyal customer base that appreciates your uniqueness and grows your business.

Challenges of Agri-Culinary Tourism

- It can be stressful dealing with the public on your farm, especially if there are logistics problems.
- Requires a significant amount of time to create, plan and manage programs.
- May need to incorporate time for educating about the realities of farm.
- Additional insurance and permits may be required.

Recommended Fact Sheets: Food Processing, Insurance, Labor

For further assistance or to make suggestions on how to improve this fact sheet, please email smallfarms@agr.wa.gov or call (360) 902-2057 or (360) 676-2059.