

Customers continue to flock to roadside stands for fresh, local products

Farm stands now offering Oregon's agricultural bounty

June 24, 2009... Like hundreds of other Oregon agricultural producers, John Zielinski is ready for another busy season of selling fresh, local food products grown on his own farm to a steady stream of devoted customers. But he never has to leave his own property. Farm stands— also known as roadside stands— share with farmers' markets the direct sale of locally grown food by the people who produce it. There is no middleman as there is with retail stores or restaurants. How do they differ from farmers' markets? Instead of the farm going to the consumer, the consumer comes to the farm.

"People like having access to so many local items in one location and having a chance to meet the people who grow the food they eat," says Zielinski, whose family-owned E.Z. Orchards Farm Market in the Salem area offers a variety of products including apples, peaches, pears, and berries. "The majority of products we sell come from our own farm or other local farms, so the people who visit our farm market often compliment us on the freshness of the produce. People also express their appreciation for our farm and market being family-owned and operated."

With hundreds of farm stands to choose from, many Oregonians don't need to travel very far to buy fresh fruits and vegetables on a producer's home turf. Most farm stands are located in the Willamette Valley where much of the state's agricultural production takes place and not far from Oregon's population centers. But consumers can find a number of farms, ranches, or orchards in nearly all 36 counties that offer direct sale of what is produced onsite.

"Some are simple, some are more elaborate than a just a stand and look like real stores offering a lot of products," says Laura Barton, trade manager with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "But all of them are on the farm or next to the farm. All offer products that the farmer is growing his or herself."

In some cases, the farm stands are conveniently located. Others are off the beaten track.

"To be successful, it sure is helpful for a farm stand to be located on a thoroughfare so that people driving by will see the sign," says Barton. "Those tucked away on a country road can do well, too. But then it becomes more of a destination where you have to seek them out. People can find stands along the main highways that have been there for years. Because they are more visible, people are more likely to stop along the way to somewhere else and pick up things."

For E.Z. Orchards and the Zielinski family, establishing a farm stand was part of the plan to expand and diversify. When the family had the opportunity to purchase property ideally suited for a farm direct enterprise, they jumped at it.

"There are advantages to farm direct marketing," says John Zielinski. "The middleman is

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eliminated, which gives the farmer a better profit margin. When we first looked at farm direct marketing, we felt it could provide a better return on investment than purchasing more land and expanding farm operations."

The story is similar for Kiyokawa Family Orchards, a 107-acre commercial fruit operation in the Hood River Valley. Numerous varieties of pears, apples, cherries, and peaches are grown for nearby packers, but the family has enhanced their orchard by selling farm direct.

"We started our fruit stand in the late 1980s to diversify our operation," says Randy Kiyokawa.

Kiyokawa Family Orchards began taking fruit to a few farmers' markets in 1997. The response was so positive that they now participate in nine farmers' markets with a season opening of early July for local cherries in some market locations.

"There are many advantages of selling directly to the customers, including getting a better price, receiving the money sooner, and reducing fruit loss due to imperfections," says Kiyokawa. "Our customers also get better prices, great selection, optimum flavor because the fruit is allowed to hang on the tree longer, and a closer look at where their food comes from. Visitors can't believe the price and selection. I get the biggest kick from the ones that take a bite of an apple and say it is the best they ever had."

The Kiyokawas also offer self-guided orchard tours, a picnic area, and a u-pick block that allows customers to pick their own apples. Families can make a day of driving the scenic Hood River loop while getting a chance to truly experience an orchard environment.

Some farm stands open year around, but most are seasonal and reflect what is growing in the area at the time of the year. Salad greens and nursery starts are usually the first to make an appearance. With strawberries now in season, many farm stands will be offering fresh berries over the next several weeks—transitioning from strawberries to blackberries or raspberries to blueberries. A lot depends on what part of Oregon the stand is located. In Eastern Oregon, it might be more melons and less berries. The selection may be greater at farmers' markets because so many vendors travel relatively great distances to sell their goods. But the farm stands exclusively give the consumer the experience of visiting the site where the product is grown.

Farm stands continue to be popular with clients of government nutrition programs in which qualifying individuals and families are able to purchase fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Oregon's Farm Direct Nutrition Programs (FDNP) offer a packet of three-dollar checks to senior participants and four-dollar checks to WIC clients (Women, Infants, and Children). Both groups can buy fresh produce from authorized farmers at both farmers' markets and farm stands. The programs are administered by the Oregon Department of Human Services in partnership with the US Department of Agriculture and ODA.

No matter which direction you turn, seniors, young families, and all other types of consumers in Oregon have plenty of opportunities to buy directly from the farm this summer— even at the farm itself.

For more information, contact Laura Barton at (503) 872-6600.