

FIVE MODELS TO ADDRESS FOOD ACCESS THROUGH YOUR FARM BUSINESS:

These are the models we use at Pine Root. There are other options out there. It's important to pick one or more that fit well within your operation: match your scale, marketing style, and business and personal goals.

1. DONATE EXTRA PRODUCE

At Pine Root, we try to donate all of our extra produce to local food pantries and community meals. This is food we can't sell, for example: bushels of zucchini at the height of zucchini season; ugly carrots; food coming back from the farmers market. This is not food that could be easily sold to wholesalers with a bit of hustle, and definitely not food that would be fed to our neighbors' pigs or composted.

This is the first way we started working on food access in our area, and it's one of the easiest. We started with the "drop and run" option, and built relationships later. We still rely heavily on volunteers to pick up, especially during the busy season.

Questions and tips to consider:

- This model is very easy for most types of farms to adopt and doesn't take much to start.
- How much produce on your farm ends up going to the pigs or compost that could have been donated when it was fresh?
- Are you willing or able to drop off donations to a pantry at least once a week, or do you need to arrange for a volunteer to come pick up from your farm or market?
- When you have extra produce, how much do you have? Local pantries can usually only handle a bushel or two of cucumbers at a time, whereas food-rescue groups like Wayside can take a truckload (it's a good idea to call ahead).
- If you can swing it, stay at the pantry or send an apprentice to "man the table", this puts a face to your food and you can explain how to prepare kale.
- Some food pantries have funds that they can buy produce with. Do you need to be paid for some or all of the food you provide?
- Make sure what you are donating is good quality – you should be able to put your name on it. Listen to what food pantries want, and try to prioritize those donations. Diversity is exciting, and this model is great way to get new things into the pantries. Bringing in fun items like flowers or pumpkins for kids is always a huge hit.

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2. ALLOW GLEANING

Sometimes we have a crop that can be gleaned (harvested by volunteers after we've harvested what we want, or rescued if we don't have the time/need to harvest it). Good examples of gleaning would be cleaning up a winter squash field at the end of the main harvest, or pulling up an older row of green beans that aren't worth it to the farmer to keep harvesting. Your own crew can do the gleaning if you choose, but usually it's done by food pantry volunteers or by a gleaning group.

Questions and tips to consider:

- This model is good for farmers who need help cleaning up and are good at letting go.
- Consider how you feel about having individuals or groups coming on to your farm to glean. In the beginning it's a bit of work to set clear boundaries and communicate, but after that it can become hassle free.
- Make sure it's a crop or field worth the time to glean. Don't ask gleaners to pull all your bean plants if all the fruit is woody.
- It's appropriate to share the harvest, just make sure to establish that beforehand: i.e when we pull up our cucumber vines with gleaners, we might keep half for the business and donate half.
- Check out Sherman Farms in NH for a thriving gleaning program.

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3. PLANT “ROWS FOR THE HUNGRY”

Our “Rows for the Hungry” came about by accident. A few years ago we laid four extra rows of black plastic mulch and drip tape and had no plan for them - a big waste. At the same time, our friend Don who grows food for pantries was a little late getting his gardens planted, and we lured him with drip irrigation and tractor powered cultivation. Together we bought a little extra seed, organized some volunteers, and grew our first Rows for the Hungry. Now we do it every year.

Questions and tips to consider:

- This model is perfect for farms with a lot of space and access to volunteers.
- Planting extra rows requires extra space, so if your farm feels tight this might not be the best model for you. However, you can do this at any scale – a lot of home gardeners plant rows for the hungry.
- You can generally rely on volunteers to help plant, weed once or twice, and harvest the rows. Plan on doing the cultivating, irrigating, and pest and disease management.
- Grow popular, low maintenance, economical crops like beets, carrots, or winter squash. Don't grow obscure, expensive, high maintenance, crops like specialty greens, sweet corn, or tomatoes. Sometimes volunteers don't show up, and most food pantries are held weekly or even bi-weekly. You can get exciting, diverse crops into the pantries by donating your excess.
- Don't be rigid. Early on we got hung up on keeping the rows 100% separate from our business, but it's ok to harvest small amounts for the stand or CSA if you need to.

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4. JOIN “PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PRODUCE”

“Prescriptions for Produce” is a program working to address food security and improve health in our communities. My sister Grace Pease, owner of Merrifield Farm Stand, approached Sacopee Valley Health Center in Porter with the idea of partnering with them to prescribe healthy, free produce to families in need. It’s had a great impact on participant’s health, and has become a rewarding model on both of our farms.

Simply put, health care providers find families who would benefit and prescribe them a free CSA membership. Our businesses bear most of the cost, some years a local entrepreneur gives us a small, no-strings-attached grant that we use to include bought in fruit like strawberries or apples in the prescriptions. The Health Center takes care of selecting families, and interviews them to find out family size, produce preference, and scheduling needs. We would love to extend the program to other farms and communities.

Questions and tips to consider:

- This model is perfect for a farm with a CSA or farm stand.
- Make sure to commit to the right number of prescriptions for your business. Start small you can always add families next year or during the season.
- Grace started this program in our area, so if there is nothing similar to join near you, consider starting something yourself in partnership with a health center or even a group like a church. It’s a little tricky to select families on your own, and the program should be confidential and run correctly.
- Some folks aren’t comfortable going to a food bank, or can’t fit it into their schedules. The prescription model solves some of those problems by offering custom pick-up times and confidentiality.
- If you offer your CSA members perks like CYO flowers, be sure to offer them to Prescription members.
- Explore the idea of having paying CSA members sponsor a prescription.

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5. SHARE AND LEVERAGE YOUR FOOD ACCESS WORK

Customers and community members really want to hear about what your farm does regarding food access, and a lot of times they want to get involved. Most of what we do with food access at Pine Root wouldn't be possible without the help of volunteers. We don't always do a good job of recruiting help, or publicizing our efforts, but it's worth it when we do. Here are a few ways we've added value to our business through the above models:

- Attracting the best apprentices
- Finding new customers
- Forming new partnerships
- Making creative free-lease agreements
- Matching our business and personal values and goals
- Build generosity into your farm business

Notes:

An incomplete list of other models:

- Accept SNAP
- Host a community meal
- Host a food pantry
- Grow exclusively for food pantries
- Trade volunteer work for produce
- Organize seedling rescues
- Organize food rescues after markets
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