

Finding New Markets for Maine Farmers

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This information is designed to help farmers and growers who have lost some or all of their markets (or are looking for a new market). It helps the farmer or grower consider alternative market options for their produce or products. The options listed below could be applied to plant-based or animal-based products. However, not every option may be viable, useful, or reasonable for every situation. Covid-19 has impacted consumer demand for nearly all food products. Consumers are increasingly seeking local sources of food.

Your search for a new market will be more effective, if you follow a logical approach. This involves tasks such as identifying your starting point, setting a value on your product, identifying possible market options, and how you'd like to close the deal. Let's get started.

Compile Background Information

Describe the product or crop that you wish to sell. Include the expected yield(s) in pounds or volume, expected calendar date(s) for harvest and market delivery, expected quality of the product, and any qualifying information such as variety, cultivar, organic, conventional, GAP certified, etc.

Do your best to describe your typical customer listing their demographics, lifestyle patterns and expectations. Why would these consumers be interested in buying your products?

Aim to provide the highest quality product possible. List the product attributes and benefits that your target customers desire. Your name and reputation as a farmer are reflected in the quality of your products.

Do your best to calculate a monetary value to your crop or product (using costs such as your investment of time, seed, feed, fertilizer and the current market prices). Calculate the price you need to break even. Then calculate the price you need to make a reasonable profit.

For any of the options listed, don't waste any time. The longer your crop sits in the field (if ready for harvest) or in storage, the more likely the quality will diminish. Determine if there is a need for additional product sales in the alternative markets you are considering.

Sequential Steps

At the point in time when you know or realize that some or all of your market is lost (or you are looking for a new market) for a specific crop or product, consider these steps. If you aren't sure if a market exists, begin this process as soon as possible.

1. Identify possible alternative markets or outlets by
 - a. making phone calls or sending messages (see suggested contact types listed in the appropriate options section below),
 - b. performing online searches (see suggestions below), or
 - c. making it known to others what you have (or will have) available. Be specific.
2. Determine the exact date (or span of dates) when your crop or product is expected to reach its peak quality and when it would be ready for market delivery. Also determine the estimated shelf life of the product.
3. Calculate a monetary value of the crop or product by considering expected yields (in pounds or volume), quality, and other qualifying factors.
4. Assemble a list of inputs and items necessary for efficient harvest and sale of the crop or product. These may include labor, harvest equipment, processing equipment, containers, packaging, labels, scales, transportation, etc. This list of inputs will be useful when the time comes to harvest, weigh, handle, pack, and sell.
5. Implement your plan. A written plan will help document your actions and related information and may help to avoid mistakes, time wasters, or shortcomings next time.
6. Record all facts and factors related to this crop or product, its harvest, and sale such as date, time invested, inputs, buyer's contact information, buyer's feedback, feedback from you and your staff, etc.

Identify Appropriate Options

Consider all of the possible options to sell your product within a 10, 20, 50, and 100-mile radius from our site. If possible, develop a map with the possibilities—with names and contact information (if known). The possible buyers may include:

- grocery stores
- convenience stores
- health food stores
- restaurants,
- schools
- colleges
- caterers
- nursing homes
- group homes
- municipal or county jails
- social clubs or organizations
- bakeries
- food trucks
- summer camps
- cooperative housing units
- food cooperatives
- food pantries and soup kitchens
- churches
- food auctions
- bed and breakfasts
- campgrounds
- neighboring or area farm stands;
- farmers who sell at farmers markets
- farmers who have a CSA enterprises (community supported agriculture)
- farmers with online markets

Online Research

Perform a raw on-line search to determine potential buyers of the specific crop or product. Enter the crop (or product) and the state (or county) into your search. Once you find some possibilities, make a phone call, send a text message, or send an email message. Explain your situation and offer to provide sample product. Realize that not all online searches will be fruitful.

Social Media/Online Sales

Let others know of your need for a market (or the availability of your crop or product) via your Maine Fruit and Veg ListServe, FaceBook, Instagram or Linked-in account. Consider setting up your own online platform and selling your products from your farm (if feasible).

Real Maine

Do a search on the “Real Maine” website of the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. Search by county or product to find farmers and growers who may be interested in purchasing your product(s). getrealmaine.com/members/

How to become GAP certified

In order to sell to Hannaford or other retailers, GAP certification is required. For more information contact Chris Howard, Produce Safety Professional, University of Maine Cooperative Extension, christina.howard@maine.edu or call 207.212.8612.

Other Marketing Tips:

- **Interact with Someone Likely “In the Know”**

Consider making some calls and asking one or more of the following contacts if they know of any possible buyers: Extension specialists, local Extension staff, farmer listservs, state Farm Bureau office, local Chamber of Commerce, local or state economic development office, town office or city hall, state organic farmer association, fellow members of your farmer association(s), or private agricultural consultants.

- **Maine Farm and Seafood Products Directory**

University of Maine Cooperative Extension has created a spreadsheet on available local farm products and alternative pick-up options developed by farmers statewide to accommodate the recommended social distancing in light of COVID-19. The directory can be viewed at extension.umaine.edu/serving-maine/ To have your farm added to this list, complete the form at extension.umaine.edu/agriculture/farm-product-and-pickup-directory/submission-form/

- **Pick Your Own Sales**

Determine if pick-your-own (PYO) might be feasible for your crop. Check with your insurance carrier to verify you are appropriately covered. Check with your town or municipality to verify that a PYO enterprise is okay. Realize all that’s involved to successfully operate a PYO enterprise including workers and supplies such as a scale, containers, flags, parking space, accessibility, etc.

- **Add Value to the Crop or Product**

Consider the possibility of adding value to the product after harvest. Would adding value be a reasonable approach? Adding value may include processes such as grading, sizing, washing, cutting, peeling, bagging, steaming, cooking, canning, curing, or pickling. Adding value to a crop can take a considerable amount time, research, and money. But by looking into the possibility, you may come across buyers who are seeking exactly what you have available. FMI, see University of Maine Cooperative Extension bulletin “Considerations for Adding Value to Agricultural Products in Maine” extension.umaine.edu/publications/1062e/

- **Donating the Crop or Product**

Consider the possibility of donating the food to the local food pantry or soup kitchen. If this is a possibility, don’t wait until the last minute. Food pantries and soup kitchens have a need to plan ahead too. Provide the food pantry with detailed information describing your crop(s). As an option to you

having to harvest the crop, some food pantries, local food security councils have organized groups of gleaners (volunteers who are trained to harvest crops). Gleaning your crop may be a feasible approach.

If you are looking for gleaners, UMaine Extension coordinates gleaning programs in several counties. Call your local Cooperative Extension office for more information.

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