



# FINDING YOUR MARKET

A GUIDE FOR BEGINNING FARMS  
TO SELL FARM PRODUCTS





UConn Extension’s Solid Ground Farmer Training Program was launched in 2016 to meet the needs of Connecticut’s 2800+ beginning farmers. Our work focuses on improving their ability to withstand disruption and setbacks (weather-related, environmental, financial, personal) and giving them tools to thrive. This also includes business and financial training, one-on-one business technical assistance, cohort based training in production and farmer-to-farmer learning events that build strong peer networks, and enhanced services to help Beginning Farmers in their search for farmland.

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# INTRODUCTION



# DEAR READER

One of the tenets of a successful farm is developing a marketing strategy that fits your farm business model. The right market can create a reliable income stream that moves your products and presents opportunities for growth. Finding and choosing a direction for your sales can be a challenge if you are not familiar with the options available for Connecticut farmers. That's why we have refreshed our guide (originally published in 2017), to help you match your farm, products, and business model to the right markets available to you. This guide explores many of the available avenues for sales, including pros and cons of each market type, questions to help you consider if this fits your business model, and steps to transition to a new sales channel. Leaning heavily on the wisdom of farmers in the state, this guide includes input from experienced small farm operators across Connecticut.

We hope this guide helps your farm business as you scale up into new markets and find your place in the landscape of over 5000 farms in our state.



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National Institute of Food and Agriculture  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# GETTING STARTED

There are several questions you should ask yourself when searching for the best market for your local farm products.

- Which avenues will be the most profitable
- What is the best use of you and your staff's time
- What infrastructure, equipment, and supplies do you currently have access to
- Do you have the personality or staff to sell through this marketing channel
- How do you feel about customers regularly being on your property
- Do you have connections with a particular market
- Where is the demand
- Is your current price profitable, or could you charge more by changing a product
- What do other farmers in the area say about this market opportunity



**Focusing your time and energy on customers** and outlets that will best support your business is a critical step towards profitability, so don't expect to fit into every market opportunity or engage every person you meet as a customer. New farmers strive to strike a balance between identifying markets for their products and crafting a diverse business plan. It's essential to remain pragmatic about managing multiple opportunities. Optimal outcomes arise from identifying personal strengths (or those of your team) and aligning them with the most suitable sales opportunities.

There is ample opportunity in CT for new farmers to creatively market and sell their farm products, but developing an effective sales plan takes time and attention to detail. Good sales records will be essential for determining the most profitable markets for your farm business and adjusting each season.

## Diversifying Markets

While each of the following sales channels have their own set of advantages and challenges, and many farms are successful choosing just one to focus on, it can also be profitable to combine two or more channels. For example, you could have a CSA pickup on Thursday, attend a farmers' market on Saturdays and then set up a restaurant drop-off on Monday or Tuesday. Diversifying sales channels can also have the benefit of spreading out your risk. If there's a rainy farmers' market day or a restaurant closes for a few weeks, you have other ways to move product. In addition, the more sales channels you have, the easier it is to move products before they go bad. The goal in developing a diverse and detailed marketing plan is to sell as many products as possible while reducing the amount of food sitting in freezers/coolers or unharvested in the fields.

\* This guide is certainly not a comprehensive list of all local marketing opportunities, but a starting point for considering the most common sales outlets for small-scale producers.

# COMPARING MARKETS

Every potential market comes with upsides and downsides. The challenge for a new farm is to figure out which market, or mix of markets, best fit their business model, production capacity, price requirements, risk tolerance, and personality. A basic overview of each market's characteristics is in the chart below, and you will find more details about each in the sections that follow.

<b>DIRECT TO CONSUMER</b>	<b>Need for Product Diversity</b>	<b>Customer Interaction</b>	<b>Potential Travel</b>	<b>Item Price Potential</b>	<b>Certainty of Sale</b>
<b>Farmers' Markets</b>	Medium	High	Medium-High	High	Medium
<b>Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)</b>	High	Medium-High	Low	Medium-High	High
<b>Farm Stand</b>	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium
<b>Pick Your Own</b>	Low	Medium-High	Low	Medium	Medium

<b>WHOLESALE</b>	<b>Need for Product Diversity</b>	<b>Customer Interaction</b>	<b>Potential Travel</b>	<b>Item Price Potential</b>	<b>Certainty of Sale</b>
<b>Aggregators</b>	Low	Low	Medium	Low-Medium	High
<b>Institutions</b>	Low	Low	Medium	Low-Medium	Medium
<b>Restaurants, Food Trucks, and Caterers</b>	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
<b>Co-Ops and Grocery Stores</b>	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
<b>Farm To Food Assistance</b>	Low	Low	Medium	Low-Medium	Medium

*Ratings range from low to high, with high indicating greater opportunity or involvement in that area (such as higher prices or more customer contact), and low indicating less.*

# BEFORE YOU SELL CHECKLIST

There are some things you should do regardless of what sales channel(s) you pursue. As you decide which direction to take, here are some ways to prepare.

✓	Check with CT Department of Agriculture (DoAg) and Department of Consumer Protection (DCP) about permits, registrations, or training required.
✓	Check with your town about required permits for conducting sales.
✓	Register with CT Department of Revenue Services (DRS) and obtain a Sales and Use Tax Permit. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Any business selling goods in Connecticut must obtain a Sales and Use Tax Permit, even if all your products are exempt.</li><li>• DRS will tell you if you need to file monthly, quarterly, or annually. There is registration fee.</li></ul>
✓	Get Insurance. Be sure to have the appropriate liability coverage for your business.
✓	Set up a Point of Sale (POS) service. This gives you the ability to accept credit cards (and possibly SNAP benefits) and track sales (by outlet and / or by item)
✓	Collect data about your customers that you can use to increase your future sales (e-mail addresses, buying habits).
✓	Create a website, a logo, and set up social media accounts. Strong branding helps customers remember you.



Dahlias

\$7.99

Windham Flower Farm

**DIRECT TO  
CONSUMER**



# FARMERS' MARKETS

There over 100 Farmers' Markets in CT, each representing a unique variety of customer types. Some markets run through the winter, giving you the opportunity for a year-round income. You can also expand your options by attending markets in other states.

## ADVANTAGES

- Farmers' markets allow for flexibility. You can bring whatever you have that week regardless of quantity or consistency.
- Farmers' markets offer the potential for high retail pricing.
- The customer base in farmers' markets is primarily people who already care about local food.
- There is a pre-existing customer base for most farmers' markets and some of the marketing may be handled by market management.
- Customers in farmers' markets get face-to-face time with you or your staff, so you can answer questions and get feedback in real time.
- Farmers' markets provide a way to get involved in your local community.
- Farmers' markets can give you an opportunity to connect with customers who rely on SNAP and other nutrition incentive programs.
- The concentrated selling window of a farmers' market provides the opportunity for many sales in a short amount of time.

## CHALLENGES

- Farmers' markets are time-consuming, including the time to load a vehicle, commute, and unload each market day.
- Farmers' markets demand many paid staff hours away from the farm.
- Sales are very dependent on the weather.
- Farmers' markets rely on social interaction between farmers and customers, so it's important to have at least one "people person" who enjoys engaging with customers that is staffing your table.
- The most successful farmers' markets have few openings for new vendors.
- The most successful farmers' markets usually happen on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.
- You are selling right next to the competition. You will need to create an eye-catching display to draw people in and distinguish yourself from other vendors.
- It is hard to know what will sell week-to-week and year-to-year. Customer demand and desires shift with trends and other vendors may offer similar and competing products.
- You will need a tent, tables, a sign, other market supplies, staff, and a vehicle large enough to transport your market supplies and your product.
- Health Department requirements vary widely from region to region, so what you need to vend at one town's farmers' market might not be sufficient for every market.



## ASK YOURSELF...

- **How established is the market?** How many vendors are there and what is the breakdown of type of products? (veg / meat / dairy / flowers / prepared foods / artisans)
- **Is it a place customers come to do their weekly shopping, or more of a craft fair/ hang out spot?**
- **Is it well attended?** Is attendance consistent or is there a “busy season”?
- **What are the market fees?**
- **How well is the market advertised?**
- **Is the market “producer only?”**
- **Does the market accept SNAP and other nutrition incentives?**
- **What time and day of week is the market?**
- **What kind of location is it (parking lot, park, etc.),** are vendors allowed to have their vehicle with them or must they unload and park somewhere else?
- **How much do you need to make for it to be worth your time?**

**It may be helpful to visit the market in person before applying to check out the layout and customer base, and to connect with the market manager. If the market has an “off-season” consider applying during that time when it’s not as busy. Bear in mind that if you choose to participate in any Certified Markets, you will need to fill out a Crop Plan for CT Department of Agriculture and attend mandatory training to accept payment in the form of state and federally funded nutrition incentives that customers may bring to the market (known as FMNP and SFMNP checks).**

## FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“Get to know your customers and be able to give them that ‘know your farmer’ experience. Be ready to talk with people! They may have questions about your growing practices, how to cook your produce, how far you traveled to be there, etc. We think it’s important to give customers time and attention in order to help them connect with the local food movement and become better educated, dedicated consumers. When you’re busy that can be hard to do, but the pay-off of dedicated customers that show up every week is well worth it.”

**CHARLOTTE ROSS, SWEET ACRE**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Regulations/Certificates

Some markets require you to get a certificate from the local health district and follow specific sanitary guidelines, depending on what you’re selling. Check with your market.

#### Insurance

Additional insurance coverage is needed to sell your products at a farmers market, so check in with your insurance company

“The community atmosphere of farmers’ markets fosters a strong local customer base. People appreciate knowing where their meat comes from and enjoy buying directly from the producer. This direct connection allows us to share the story behind our farm, build relationships with customers, and gather invaluable feedback. Understanding their preferences helps us tailor our offerings to what the local community truly desires.”

**NICK WEINSTOCK, BOTL FARM**



# FARMSTANDS

A Farmstand can be a great opportunity to sell your product with relatively little effort on your end. Options vary from small roadside stands set up seasonally, to full service farm stores that might even carry products from other farms.

## ADVANTAGES

- Farmstands can use retail pricing.
- Farmstands can remain open longer hours, which is convenient for customers.
- Hours can fit around your schedule.
- No travel is required for you or your products.
- It's possible to re-stock quickly and keep pace with demand.
- Self-serve farmstands require little time and labor.
- Farmstands can be a place where you can invite area producers to sell their products alongside your products.
- Can choose the type of payments that fit how you staff the stand such as: cash, debit/credit, Venmo, FMNP, and EBT.

## CHALLENGES

- Farmstands may require continuous staffing.
- Farmstands are subject to more inspection and regulation than some other direct marketing options. This means knowing what the regulations are and spending time keeping the farmstand up to code.
- It can take time to learn what customers want and when they want it.
- Customers may expect a full-service grocery store.
- Customers will be on your farm, which can be a challenge if you don't have clearly defined areas for the public versus your workspace.
- Farmstands require nearby parking that is mostly dry and well delineated.
- Signage for your farmstand is subject to local rules and requirements, which may vary in neighboring towns where you wish to post signs as well.
- Self-serve farmstands have the potential for theft.

“Getting that retail dollar for your product is not something that comes without its costs. Your retail space needs to have the right staff, cleanliness, atmosphere, marketing, etc. One of the best pieces of advice I got prior to building our farm store was that the public wants to feel like they are on a farm, but they don't want to BE on the farm.”

**LARS DEMANDER, CLOVER NOOK FARM**



## ASK YOURSELF...

- **Are you willing to become an authorized retailer to accept SNAP benefits at your farm stand?** SNAP beneficiaries can spend their SNAP benefits by swiping a SNAP electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card (like a debit card) at an authorized retailer's point-of-sale (POS) device.
- **Which Point-of-Sale system will you use for digital transactions?**
- **Do you want to supplement your products with other local products or out of season products so that your farmstand can be open year-round or at least be full for the months that it is open?** If you do carry products that are not yours, how will your labeling make it clear to customers where the products are coming from? There may be local regulations with towns around selling outside products at your farmstand?
- **Do you need additional insurance or special permits from municipality if the public will be regularly allowed on your farm property?**
- **Do you need a restroom for customers?**
- **Will you be able to keep the parking area clear of snow in colder weather?**

Keep in mind that people expect to see a farmstand that is stocked regularly. A self-serve stand is more flexible, while a staffed store will be expected to have full shelves and a wide variety of items. Make sure you have the time to create your displays and prepare before opening your farmstand each day.

## FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“Start with limited selection, but ample quantity and scale up from there. Keep it simple in terms of variety (simple red tomatoes instead of different types of heirlooms, one type of squash instead of three varieties of summer squash, one type of cucumber). Once they are familiar with your stand and the quality of product, they are more willing to try new things.”

**JANE MEISER, STONE ACRES FARM**

## EXTRA STEPS:

### Regulations/Certificates

Towns can have regulations around what farmstands can sell including if they need to get a certificate from the Health District.

### Insurance

Additional insurance coverage is needed to have people on your farm, so talk to your insurance agent about the policy that's best for you.

“Don't be afraid to retail other growers' produce. It's nice to offer items that you yourself do not grow to expand your market.”

**HALEY BILLIPP, EDDY FARM**



# CSA

**Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is when the consumer purchases a share of a farm's product upfront, providing the farmer with the money needed to support cash flow in the early part of the season. In exchange, the customer receives a share of the farm's products at agreed upon intervals (weekly, biweekly, monthly, etc). Many farmers appreciate that this is not only a way to market their product, but also a great way to get to know the community as members will visit consistently at each pick up.**

## ADVANTAGES

- Having a reliable income from selling CSA member shares will simplify budgeting, crop planning, scheduling processing of livestock, etc.
- Upfront payment covers costs before products go to market and can limit the need for a line of credit or other short-term debt.
- Much of the marketing happens during the winter “off-season,” rather than at the height of summer.
- On-farm CSA distribution requires less travel than other marketing channels.
- Off-farm CSA distribution requires less of a time commitment than farmers' markets.
- The CSA model can be flexible. You can do a pre-paid card model (preloading a gift card to be used at your farmstand/market). You can include pick-your-own. You can have one pickup location or multiple pick-up locations. You can give everybody the same thing, or you can have a “farmstand” style CSA where people have some choice within categories.
- The CSA business model inherently fuels strong community buy-in and support.

## CHALLENGES

- It can take time to figure out which types, varieties, and quantities of food your members enjoy eating. Most appreciate a selection of familiar offerings, with a few interesting products mixed in.
- With weather outside of your control, it can be hard to always have the necessary amount and mix of products at the right time.
- Consumers like convenience, which can make it challenging to lure customers to the farm for on-farm CSA pick-up. Flexible pick-up options, times, locations, and days can improve convenience for members.
- Consumer education requires frequent attention as members want to learn about how their food is grown, how it should be handled, and how it can be prepared. This need can be addressed through an newsletter.
- Members often want and expect to see the farmer (and not staff) at pickup times but scheduling that time away from other farm tasks can be difficult.
- Some customers are not able to pay upfront for the full cost of the CSA. Creating and managing payment plans to offer customers flexibility becomes extra administrative work for the farmer.
- Despite the underlying principle that CSA member are willing to share in the farmers' risk, this may not always hold up to an unexpected crop failure. Especially with a high volume crop such as tomatoes, you may be forced to purchase these crops elsewhere to avoid CSA member disappointment.



## ASK YOURSELF...

- **For how much of the year do you reliably have enough product for a box?** Do you want to offer separate shares for each season? How many shares can you comfortably offer?
- **What is your marketing plan?** How will you reach potential shareholders?
- **Does your description / contract clearly state what happens if a customer misses a pickup / if there is a crop failure?**
- **What type of pickup(s) will you offer?** How many pickup locations will you offer? Will the farm be one of them?
- **Will you partner with other farm(s) or local businesses to offer your customers a wider range of products?** (sometimes these are called 'add-ons' that can include eggs, local bread, dairy, etc)
- **How will you integrate member feedback?** Will you create a survey at the end of the season?
- **Will you plan and/or host something that gives members an opportunity to meet each other and share their experience, like an open house, end of season event, or volunteer day?**

## FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“Without a doubt CSAs bring people closer to their food. I want people to understand that turkey was a living creature, not just a hunk of protein that shows up on a grocery store shelf. Years of CSA membership allow customers to learn more fully about the relationships we farmers have with our animals. Keeping lines of communication open with members also allows us to adapt and improve, as they are often our most loyal buyers.”

**KATHERINE HERMONOT, EKONK HILL TURKEY FARM**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Insurance

Make sure your insurance covers having customers on your property for CSA pickups if applicable.

“A CSA is dependable. Knowing the demand in advance can make you much more efficient in what you grow. Often times CSA members are devoted customers and they can do some of the sales for you by referring friends. You can get more than just a customer when you sell a share.”

**BAYLEE DROWN, LONG TABLE FARM**



# PICK YOUR OWN

For many people, their first experience with a farm is at a Pick Your Own (PYO) operation. There are plenty of things to consider, however, as patrons basically become un-trained individuals that are harvesting your crop! PYO can stand alone as a sales channel or work alongside your CSA or farm stand to generate additional sales opportunities for you.

## ADVANTAGES

- PYO sales can save on labor as you don't have to pay staff to harvest the crop.
- You can specialize in many varieties of a specific crop on a PYO farm, such as many varieties of strawberries (early season, late season) or many varieties of flowers that bloom at different times.
- Customers will travel to you and your PYO farm.
- PYO sales can draw in customers to your other sales channels, such as your CSA or farmstand.
- PYO provides a rewarding experience for your customers in addition to a sales transaction.

## CHALLENGES

- Large PYO operations can introduce new labor costs in the form of staff needed to guide visitors and to manage customer check out.
- Customers will not pick efficiently, will eat some of the harvest, and could do damage to your crop.
- You may need to educate customers on "ripeness" or how to pick without harming the plants.
- Customers will go into your fields, which may introduce new risks to your crops.
- Many people are looking for fun family experiences rather than just buying food, so they may have unrealistic expectations or be unwilling to spend a lot of money.
- You will need to have adequate parking and probably a bathroom too.

"It takes less labor for us than to hire people to pick the berries, cool them, and find a market or try to sell them all at our farmstand. When you do include PYO in your operation though, education is important. You know what a ripe berry, fruit, vegetable looks like but many of your customers do not. For example, a blackberry should be 100% black to be ripe and sweet. If it has any red on it, it will be sour. Let customers know to only pick the 100% blackberries."

**-MARY CONCKLIN, RASPBERRY KNOLL FARM**

## ASK YOURSELF...

- How will you determine how much of a given crop there is and how many customers that quantity can handle?
- What kind of labor and infrastructure do you need to separate and protect the private parts of your farm?
- What do you need to keep the pick your own area neat and accessible (landscaping, cleaning up after customers, etc.)?



## FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“The Pick Your Own market is very niche. While the retail dollars it capitalizes on can be enticing, new farmers should consider if their farm grounds and their own personal staff strengths lend themselves to a PYO operation. It can be challenging to have the public on your farm picking since produce can be damaged and/or good produce passed over as they will naturally not pick as thoroughly or methodically as a trained farm staff would. That being said, PYO certainly can open up a unique channel and connect you to a customer base who truly appreciates quality local grown produce as well as an on-farm experience.”

**JANE MEISER, STONE ACRES FARM**

“A few things to consider as you develop your pick your own flower farm: You’ll need help. You cannot serve as head grower and run the retail portion of the farm. You’ll be putting in many hours behind the scenes, and you will need help at the register. In order to make the farm viable, you’ll need strong customer support. Consider working with an existing customer base by adding in pick your own flowers to an existing business.

This is much easier than going it alone and starting from scratch.”

**JEN HALFINGER,  
DANCING DAFFODILS  
FARM**

## EXTRA STEPS:

### Insurance

Make sure your insurance covers having customers on your property and interacting with the farm beyond a retail space.





**WHOLESALE**

Kale  
Salem, CT  
\$3.99/lb.

TOBACCO ROAD FARM  
LOCALLY  
GROWN  
LEBANON, CT  
BULK TURNIPS  
\$2.29/lb.

Provider Farm  
LOCAL  
UNSPRAYED  
gold bee  
\$3.49/lb.  
Salem, CT



# FOOD HUBS & AGGREGATORS

Food Hubs and Aggregators (also called Food Co-ops or Buyer Collectives) provide a vital service by facilitating wholesale transactions between local producers and buyers. By aggregating products from multiple small producers, these organizations can provide more consistency and higher volume to institutional and other wholesale buyers than a single small farm might be able to.

## ADVANTAGES

- You can move a lot of products with a single drop off time and location.
- Food hubs can offer consistent demand and a regular schedule of weekly drop-offs.
- By aggregating your products along with similar products from other area farms through a food hub you can sell your products to larger institutional buyers that you may not have the capacity to serve on your own.
- You can specialize and expand production of what you produce best.
- Your farm business will be associated with a business with a values-driven mission.
- Some food hubs offer light processing for your products to make them more appealing to buyers.

## CHALLENGES

- Food hubs often rely on a lower price point than direct retail sales.
- Food hub buyers may need consistency in size, shape, and quality of product.
- There are fewer opportunities for premium quality products (e.g. organic) through aggregators.
- There may be competition with other growers that have similar products who are selling through the same food hub.
- Food hubs may require food safety protocols.
- It can be hard to meet the quantity benchmarks required by food hubs.

“Being able to sell to Brass City Harvest is a major benefit to us. They support small and local farmers and make it simple and easy to do business with. We are compensated at market value and paid out within a reasonable time frame. Whether our produce is sold at their markets at an affordable rate or donated it goes directly to the underserved urban population and that is a great feeling.”

**SHAWN JOSEPH, PARK CITY HARVEST**

### FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“Selling through a collective, or hub, is a great way for farmers to combine forces and share distribution resources. It’s important to be able to grow consistent product however, so customers trust they will get the same product no matter who supplies it. Collectives are gaining popularity, but like farmers markets, sometimes are competitive to get into, so do research and make inquiries before the season starts”

**KRISTYNA HULLAND, OFF CENTER FARM**



### EXTRA STEPS:

#### **Certificates/Insurance**

Food Hubs may require certifications/insurance to sell your products. Check with the food hubs to see what they require.

#### **Product Quality/Labeling**

Check with the food hub to see if they would like your order packaged in a certain way and if they need specific sizes or quality.

# INSTITUTIONS

**Institutions include schools, universities, hospitals, and prisons where large numbers of people gather daily to eat. The sales that are made to institutions can be made directly or through food hubs or traditional distributors.**

## ADVANTAGES

- Institutional buyers represent consistent demand and potential for larger volume sales over time.
- You can specialize and expand production of what you produce best.
- Established relationships with institutional buyers can provide a possible channel for bumper crops.
- A great way to build visibility for your farm and your products is through institutions that wish to inform their consumers about where their food comes from (e.g. using signage and posters in cafeterias.).
- When schools and early childhood centers purchase and serve your products, there's an opportunity to impact young eaters.
- Your farm business will be associated with increasing locally grown products on institutional menus and making a positive contribution toward food system change.
- Staff from CT Department of Agriculture and UConn Extension can help facilitate business connections with institutional buyers.
- Institutional buyers may be willing to establish forward contracts with an initial down payment and commitment to pay the balance for deliveries during the growing season.

## CHALLENGES

- Institutions rely on a lower price point than direct sales.
- Institutional buyers need consistency in size, shape, and quality of product.
- Food Service Directors are busy and hard to reach to discuss a potential sale.
- Institutions may require food safety protocols and possibly certifications.
- Institutional food service can be inflexible and may take substantial lead time to change their menus.
- Sales to institutions often depend on a business relationship with a Food Service Director; if this person moves on, the business relationship might end abruptly.
- Institutional buyers are used to dealing with big distributors, so there will be a learning curve for expectations regarding the production capacity and seasonality of small, local farms
- School buyers can be short on staff so may prefer items that are lightly processed (e.g. peeled and cut winter squash), though be mindful this may require extra certifications on your end.

### FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“Building new relationships with local schools and new markets is a highlight for us. Not only did it open more doors for ways to volunteer and support our schools, but it helped get our name out to families that might not have known where or who we are. And we were able to sell at market value, which make it financially worth it too.”

**REBECCA JACK, HANDEL FARM**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Certificates/Insurance

Institutions may require certifications/insurance to sell your products. Check with individual institutions to see what they require.

#### Product Quality & Food Safety

The staff at institutions are often busy and the cleanest product is preferred. They may be used to working with commercial scale agricultural products that come with a higher level of cleaning, packaging and processing then is standard on a small farm.

“We were fortunate. We were in the right place at the right time when New London Schools were just starting to put out contracts. Between New London and Groton, we sell 400 heads of green leaf lettuce a week in the fall. If you can figure out a system for it, you can move a lot of product through the schools.”

**ROB SCHACHT, HUNTS BROOK FARM**



# RESTAURANTS, FOOD TRUCKS & CATERERS

Farm to Table can encompass a variety of small scale buyers, including caterers, food truck operators, restaurants and even other farms that use special food events as part of their business model.

## ADVANTAGES

- Chefs are talented innovators and can often adjust their menu according to what you have available.
- Chef buyers represent potential sales all year long.
- If your farm is named on the menu, then you gain some market visibility.
- Working with local chefs can provide insights into current food trends and consumer preferences.
- Some chefs are willing to accept “seconds” if they are processing your products for a menu item (e.g. soup).

## CHALLENGES

- Restaurants rely on a lower price point than direct retail sales.
- Chefs are busy and hard to reach to discuss a potential sale.
- Sales to a restaurant may rely on a business relationship with a chef; if this person moves on the business relationship might end abruptly.
- Sales to a restaurant may require delivery.
- Although Farm to Table is good for marketing your business, sometimes restaurants are more supportive in theory but less so in practice. Beware of menus that indicate the restaurant is buying from you long after they have stopped placing orders.
- Chefs are often innovating and changing their menus, which makes it hard to establish pre-season agreements.
- Restaurants don't generally need or purchase large quantities of your products.

“Chefs are unlikely to initiate a relationship with a new farm supplier, especially if you are starting a brand-new business. Don't hesitate to pound the pavement, show up in the kitchen during prep with a sampling of your produce, and force your foot in the door. Aim for restaurants with realistic expectations for seasonally available produce or speak with chefs about featuring your food on their weekly specials menu. Speak with chefs in the off season to incorporate vegetables and varieties they want into your production plan. Consider establishing minimum order values for delivery and a weekly restaurant delivery day to streamline the process, from harvest to delivery.”

**WILL O'MEARA, HUNGRY REAPER FARM**



## ASK YOURSELF...

- **Seek out restaurants that are busy and use fresh foods on their menus.** They don't have to be currently advertising that they specialize in local food, but it can be easier to work with independently run restaurants than large chains.
- **Make a good first impression** and bring samples if you have them available. Plan to arrive at the kitchen during a slower time (not peak dinner service, for example) and to leave your contact information. If possible, visit with chefs during the off-season (for most CT restaurants this is in the winter) to learn about their potential needs. Inviting them to your farm can help to strengthen their connection to your products.
- **Make it easy for chefs to communicate with you.** Ask what their preferred means of communication is and send a simple, easy-to-read product list with prices for standard units at the same time each week (many chefs place weekly orders with a food distributor at the same time each week and you'll want to reach out to them before they have placed all their weekly orders).
- **Support the businesses that support you.** Supporting businesses by eating at their restaurant can create a stronger commitment on both ends to continue the partnership.

### FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“It’s best to have a dedicated person on your staff who is the consistent contact person for your restaurant accounts. Things change quickly in the restaurant business - menu, seasonality, chef turnover - so being in constant communication allows you to know what’s new and what’s needed. Season extension can also deepen relationships with restaurants. The longer you can supply produce throughout the year to a chef, the less that chef will be looking to other farms or distributors for their orders.”

**STEVE MUNNO, MASSARO COMMUNITY FARM**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Insurance

As with any time you are selling food to the public, make sure you have the appropriate insurance coverage

“Build a relationship with the chef. Learn their style & cooking preferences and offer products to match their needs. If they order, set payment terms upfront that both parties agree upon and can realistically adhere to. Then figure out the delivery logistics. Are you able to transport your product at a safe temperature? Are you able to deliver when it’s convenient for the customer? And of course, eat at their restaurant!”

**LISA KOWALYSHYN, KINDRED CROSSINGS FARM**



# CO-OPS AND STORES

Cooperatives and grocery stores can vary from operation to operation, but many of these smaller stores are more passionate about where their food comes from. Unlike chain stores, they do not charge shelving fees to suppliers.

## ADVANTAGES

- You can move a lot of products with a single drop off time and location.
- Co-ops and grocers can offer consistent demand and a regular schedule of weekly drop-offs.
- You can specialize and expand production of the items you do best.
- A great way to build visibility for your farm and products is through co-ops and grocers that inform their consumers about where their food comes from (e.g. using point-of-purchase labels).
- Tracking how fast a store needs to restock your items provides useful insight into current food trends.

## CHALLENGES

- Co-ops and grocers rely on a lower price point than direct retail sales.
- Co-ops and grocers need consistency in size, shape, and quality of product.
- Sales to a co-op or grocer will require delivery unless you partner with a distributor.
- Co-ops and grocers may require food safety certifications.
- Sales to a co-op or grocer may rely on a business relationship with the buyer; if this person moves on the business relationship might end abruptly.

“Developing relationships with local grocers has been incredibly beneficial for our farm. They’re some of the first markets we can move our produce to in the spring, when our variety is just beginning to grow - and also one of the last, when variety dwindles. We meet with produce departments in the winter to discuss the amounts of certain crops they regularly sell so that we can crop plan accordingly to meet their needs. For many of our grocery accounts, we are delivering produce twice weekly. We really value both the consistency and relationships that come with this type of wholesaling.”

**JILL VERZINO, HUNGRY REAPER FARM**

### FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“We’ve been incorporating co-ops and small stores into our wholesale portfolio for years now. While we consider ourselves to be primarily a CSA farm, these types of wholesale accounts make a great additional outlet for surplus product. We have often found co-ops to be more consistent and larger buyers for us than restaurants, which makes them a great option for wholesale”

**HANNAH TRIPP, PROVIDER FARM**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Regulations/Certificates

Check for required licensing for your product from relevant federal, state and/or local agencies.

#### Insurance

As with any time you are selling food to the public, make sure you have the appropriate insurance coverage.

#### Other

Some buyers may require a UPC code for your product.

“Selling to local and independent grocery stores allows you to reach more customers in your region. We appreciate working with these clients to offer small to midsize farmers like us more market access points.”

**KAITLYN KIMBALL, SUNSET FARM**



# FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE

In your region there may be food pantries, soup kitchens, and regional food banks that are looking to purchase from local farms. Food assistance sales can range from small weekly orders to one-time bulk orders. Even if it is a minor part of your business, selling to food assistance providers will have a direct impact on improving the health and wellness of your community.

## ADVANTAGES

- Depending on the source of funding, buyers are sometimes willing to pay close to retail prices.
- Buyers can be flexible and may express interest in much of what you grow and are ready to sell.
- Buyers may be willing to make pre-season agreements with producers.
- When purchasing, buyers may be willing to pick up products at your farm.
- Selling to food assistance buyers is an opportunity to align with your personal values and share your products with low-income households in your community.
- Your farm business will be associated with increasing access to locally grown products among low-income households and make a positive contribution toward food system change.

## CHALLENGES

- Most of the farm-to-food assistance programs rely on public funding, grants, or donations which can make them highly variable.
- It can be a learning curve to work with each buyer's unique procurement system.
- Pick up may not always be at convenient if the organization does not have any place to store the product, or the flexibility of time.
- You may be working with volunteers, which could frequently change, so you may have to explain procedures multiple times.

“Farm to Food Assistance programs bridge the gap between local producers and families facing food insecurity. By participating, you nourish your community, strengthen its economic resilience, and empower new voices in the local food system. These programs offer a win-win: a market for your produce while ensuring everyone has access to healthy food.”

**CHELSEA CHERRIER, CLICK WILLIMANTIC**

## FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“For years, it sat wrong with me that through my farm I was selling vegetables that people like me could not regularly afford; in the beginning years of my farm, I would not have been able to afford the cost of my own CSA shares. So I am incredibly grateful to be able to now sell produce to food equity programs through CLiCK and know that folks have access to high quality food regardless of their financial circumstances”

**DIANE DORFER, COBBLESTONE FARM CSA**

## EXTRA STEPS:

### Providing Options

Program leaders can give you a sense of which products their clients want. Sometimes these products are culturally relevant food.



# OTHER OPPORTUNITIES



# VALUE-ADDED

Whatever you are raising on your farm, there is probably some product you can create that prolongs the shelf life and versatility of your offerings. Whether you produce value added items through a cottage license or a commercial kitchen, or outsource production, converting raw agricultural products into items such as pickles, salsas, soaps, yarn, and sausage can be a great way to reduce waste and increase profits.

## ADVANTAGES

- Reduces waste (a good way to use excess and imperfect product).
- Extends the shelf life of products.
- Adds products to your inventory when fresh items are out of season or low in stock.
- Can utilize large quantities of product.
- Possible partnerships with processing facilities to create the item for you, using your products.
- It is relatively easy to obtain a cottage food license to process and package items yourself in Connecticut.

## CHALLENGES

- Depending on the value-added product, use of a commercial kitchen and specialty equipment may be required by the State. There are rentable commercial kitchens, but they require specific training and come with costs.
- Often need large quantities of agricultural product to make the venture profitable.
- The true cost and profitability of a value-added venture may be hard to determine.
- Often the time when it makes sense to create value-added products from fresh ingredients is already your busiest time of the year.

“When you don’t quite have markets for your produce lined up, you can end up with excessive, often highly perishable product. By processing it into a value-added product you can quickly convert a potential loss into potential income. But then you have even more income tied up in a shelf-stable product that you still have to find a market for.”

**SUSAN MITCHELL, CLOVERLIEGH FARM**

## ASK YOURSELF...

- What markets exist for your product? Is there competition?
- Does it make sense to make the products yourself or would it be better to use a co-packer/processor?
- Do you have access to a commercial kitchen or have a desire to build one? Is there a licensed facility/kitchen available for use in your area?
- What are the potential food safety risks with your product? What pathogens could be a problem? How will you control for these hazards?
- What conditions on your farm could increase the food safety risk in your processing facility?
- Do you have the time or staff required to be processing farm goods for value-added production?
- Have you contacted the Department of Public Health and the Local Health District to learn about the specific food safety regulations for your product?



## FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“Make sure that the product you are creating is a unique, standout product - something that is not already available. Making value-added products from your surplus produce allows you to extend your sales season, filling up your stand throughout the year with products that are only available seasonally otherwise. Even in the winter months our farmers’ market table has tomato products that are local, not conventional, or from the super market. People want that!”

**STEVE MUNNO, MASSARO COMMUNITY FARM**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Regulations/Certificates

Most food processing falls under the jurisdiction of Department of Consumer Protection. Check with them about the licensing you need.

#### Insurance

You may need to get additional insurance coverage to cover the production of your product, depending on the scale and scope of your sales.

“Value-added products don’t have to be food. We dry many of our products, which takes less processing, and then finish processing during the winter into new products (like dried flower arrangements, dyes, or even plant confetti) to have more to sell.”

**BECCA TOMS, TENDER EARTH HERBS**



# WINTER PRODUCTION

High tunnels, greenhouses, and indoor hydroponic growing have increased the opportunity for farms to grow and sell product during the winter months. Many farmers' markets have taken advantage of this opportunity to expand their season with just small breaks in the spring.

## ADVANTAGES

- Winter production provides the opportunity for year round income.
- If you can offer products year-round, it can help sustain strong business relationships with retail and wholesale customers.
- Currently there is less competition among farmers selling products in the winter.
- The availability of high tunnel vendors, the increase in layout options, plus access to grant funding to erect a tunnel, can make the shift into winter production more viable.

## CHALLENGES

- Raising winter crops and livestock demands a different set of knowledge and skills than farming in the warmer season.
- Winter production systems may require additional infrastructure investments (e.g. high tunnels, heated waterers, etc.).
- Winter farming can take away time from other potential tasks that you might reserve for the “slower” time of year.

“Winter production for us has always been nonnegotiable. We believe that having consistency in product availability year-round is very important. It also helps with cash flow and customer engagement through the winter months”

**JOSH CAIRNS, RAMBLE CREEK FARM**



### **FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE**

“Timing is everything. Plants need to get established before cold weather sets in and then they won’t need heat to stay alive. It’s also important to find your markets ahead of time - it’s easy to sell because there aren’t as many fresh options, but line your markets up ahead of time.”

**MATT WENT, RIVER RIDGE FARM**

### **EXTRA STEPS:**

#### **Zoning**

If you are looking to add a high tunnel or structure of any kind to your property, you should always check with town zoning before starting to make sure it adheres to zoning laws.

#### **Siting**

Knowing the right place to put your tunnel is important; be aware of soil conditions and slope percentage before starting.

# ONLINE ORDERING

Creating an online market for your farm can expand your market access and help you generate transactions you may not have had otherwise. These orders can be advertised for local pick up, or you can expand your market further if you are willing to ship out of state.

## ADVANTAGES

- Expands your customer base as anyone can find, and shop, at your website online.
- Gives you an opportunity to market and display products through professional imagery and text.
- Provides convenience to the customer as they can shop and receive their product on their own schedule.
- Collects data to allow you to improve the experience of the shopper, and indicate customer's preferences.
- You can create your own website, or use other 2nd party subscription services to sell products.

## CHALLENGES

- Attracting new customers can be time consuming as you perfect your online presence and find the best tactics to share the option with your audience.
- Online sales platforms take a lot of time to set up initially and requires attention to get orders to customers in a timely manner.
- Online shopping lacks some of the benefits of direct sales' personal connection.
- If you are going to offer shipping, this will require extra packaging and understanding of shipping costs.
- For farmers that feel less adept in using digital technology, managing an online sales platform may be challenging.

“After adding an online farm store to our business, every sale that came through was a pleasant surprise, and that never really gets old. As our main sales avenue is still in-person retail transactions, online orders are an added bonus that allows us to continue to profit while we are out working in the field. Though it's not without its trials and costs, as all technology is, having an online store has helped in streamlining our products for better brand awareness and understanding for our customers.”

**MEGAN HERBERT, WESTVIEW FARM**

## FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“Years ago we switched our traditional CSA model to 100% online orders. This new system has helped us to become so much more efficient. We know exactly how much of an item we need to pick, process and pack ahead of time.

Customers also love it- they still get to participate in community supported agriculture, but they get to order as much or as little of whatever veggies they like each week- better aligning with the needs of themselves and their families.

While it does require a bit more administrative work, the result is less waste and maximizing the potential of each crop bed by not over picking in one week hoping to sell it all.”

**COURTNEY SQUIRE, UNBOUND GLORY FARM**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Shipping

There are some restrictions on items that can be mailed to other states. Be sure you know if your products cannot be shipped to certain areas.

#### Insurance

If you are shipping out of state, your insurance may not cover the product.



# AGRITOURISM

Every time you allow customers onto your farm—whether by hosting an event, offering a hands-on experience, or inviting the community to explore—you’re conducting agritourism. For some operations, agritourism forms the foundation of their business model, with year-round events that invites visitors to the farm. Others incorporate it more occasionally, perhaps by hosting seasonal dinners that showcase their own products.

## ADVANTAGES

- Provides another revenue stream that is based on an experience and less of a product.
- Can help educate customers about your products and the value of agriculture in the community.
- Agritourism draws visitors that will shop at your farm while participating in a special event.
- A great way to highlight a niche or unique component of your farm that might not be as marketable otherwise.
- Could provide additional marketing for the farm as folks leave reviews, share the experience with others, or invite people from out of town to participate.

## CHALLENGES

- Visitors can be a potential liability by causing damage to the property (or themselves).
- Increased staff time, or hiring more staff, is often needed to help manage extra tasks, and more people, on the farm.
- Additional marketing and possibly event planning skills need to be taken into account to make your venture successful.
- Adequate signage, parking, and facilities need to be available to the public.
- Work needs to be done to keep the farm presentable to public eyes.

“Even having one event on the farm is important for our business. It’s not just an extra income stream, it’s also a great opportunity to connect with our direct community and build relationships with your neighbors. These relationships may create further marketing partnerships, help with interactions with local government, and overall, create a sense that you are important to your town.”

**BECCA TOMS, TENDER EARTH HERBS**



### FARMER TO FARMER ADVICE

“We learned that inviting other farms to join us for an evening farmers market with food and beverages allowed for all of us to sell more product. We named it the Cocktail Shakedown and Farmer’s Market to expand beyond the regular farm market customer base.”

**LORI CORRIVEAU, LITTLE DIPPER FARM**

### EXTRA STEPS:

#### Insurance

Liability insurance is a requirement when having visitors on your farm. Talk to your insurance agent to understand the best fit for your agritourism activity.

#### Zoning

If adding an ongoing agritourism activity to your farm, contact your town’s planning and zoning about the need for additional permits.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

We know that this guide is in no way comprehensive of all the markets available to you in Connecticut, which is why we encourage you to explore other resources from partners below.

### **FOOD HUBS:**

- Brass City Harvest - Waterbury
- CLiCK - Willimantic
- Northwest CT Food Hub - Torrington
- CT Flower Collective - Middletown
- Health PlanEat - Online/Statewide

### **FARM TO SCHOOL:**

UConn Extension Put Local on Your Tray Program

### **BUSINESS MANAGEMENT:**

- Growing Your Farm Business [ctgrown.gov]
- UConn Extension Farm Risk Management [ctfarmrisk.extension.uconn.edu]
- Legal Food Hub
- UConn Small Business Development Center [ctsbdc.uconn.edu]
- CT Department of Agriculture - Farmers' Market Reference Guide

Visit us at [solidground.extension.uconn.edu](https://solidground.extension.uconn.edu) for more resources and support as you continue your farm journey.

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